

Mirage of Blaze volume 1

Kuwabara Mizuna

Prologue

The dogs were violently noisy tonight.

A tepid night wind stirred through the trees, and dim streetlamps illuminated the dark streets faintly.

A sleeping residential street in the depths of night. It held, at one point, a section like a small plaza.

An old modest shrine, surrounded by railings, stood at the center of this plaza. In its interior a large stone monument had been erected.

Two shadowy figures stood before it.

"Maenduka ..." murmured one of the two, a young woman with long hair.

"Our lord is sealed within?"

"__"

Her sailor uniform flapped in the wind. The young man standing close beside her spoke.

"The barrier from four hundred years ago is still in effect."

He fixed his gaze upon it.

"Ah, I see. So spirits without corporeal bodies would not be even able to approach."

"..."

"But if *we three* should combine our "power", this barrier would be child's play. It is time to break the barrier and dissolve the seal upon the burial mound."

The young man curved beautiful red lips bewitchingly. "I have already prepared the spiritual vessel. After we have released him, I shall guide our lord. Please follow us when you can. We have waited a long time for this moment."

"—oh yes."

So saying, the girl slowly turned her gaze back to the stone monument.

"After four hundred years, we shall finally be reunited. My Lord. I, Sanjou, will release you from this seal."

As if they had sensed the sinister atmosphere, the nearby dogs howled all the louder, and a wild wind tore through the trees.

The young man quietly fixed his glare upon the monument. The girl likewise stared at it fiercely and concentrated her mind at the point between her brows.

The two began to glow with an eerie violet light. The atmosphere altered, charged with the aura of evil. That odd feeling induced a silence within all living beings in the vicinity. A dull sound came from the base of the monument. The small shrine began to vibrate as if in a violent wind.

With an awful *CRACK* a fissure ran through the stone monument.

The girl's eyes glowed violet.

The sound of destruction reverberated through the silence of the night.

Chapter 1: The Chance Meeting of Swirling Flames

In the pre-dawn hours of the Sixth, the shrine of the daimyo Takeda Shingen in Iwakubo , Koufu in the prefecture of Yamanashi was found to be destroyed by persons unknown. Yamanashi police, determining it to be a malicious prank, sought the cooperation of area residents in tracking down the perpetrators.

BAM!

The youth in school uniform who had just been thrown by the punch crashed into cases of beer piled against the edge of a wall and tumbled with a loud clamor along with the beer to the ground.

Clang clang CLANG!

"...!..."

Yuzuru exhaled, and a shudder ran through his shoulders.

He returned to himself, still standing in the pose of someone who had just thrown a straight right punch.

(Eh?)

For a moment he could not quite place where he was.

(Huh?)

He stared at his clenched fist.

(What...?)

Looking around, he saw only four high school students dressed in navy-blue uniforms. They were lying limply here and there as if someone had knocked them to the ground.

Yuzuru blinked a few times.

"Er...huh? "

The youths regarded Yuzuru with identical fearful gazes. Their faces had splotches of bruises as if someone had given them a beating, and their expressions were of elementary school children who had been bullied. They crawled together and began throwing jeers at Yuzuru with false bravado.

"Do-don't think you can get cocky, asshole!"

"W-w-w-we'll remember this!"

Having forced out their threats, they were off and running down the alley even before the echoes of their voices had faded.

"Whaaa...?"

Yuzuru stared after them, flabbergasted.

A bunch he didn't recognize. But from their uniforms, he guessed, (Students from West High? Why?)

Yuzuru looked down at himself. His uniform was in disarray and full of dust, and his necktie had come undone.

He suddenly noticed that the corner of his mouth stung sharply. His hand felt as if he had hit something, and there was a smudge of blood on his fingers.

"Oh..."

Bewildered and stunned, he began to shake.

He hadn't recognized the West High students who had run down the alleyway. His fist throbbed with the dull pain that remained after punching someone.

After...?

No, he really must have punched someone. Then he and those high school students had been...?

(What have I been doing...?)

Yuzuru covered his mouth with his hand. He tried to think back. But he had no memories to follow. He couldn't remember—everything was a complete blank.

What had he been doing?

Yuzuru's expression stiffened a little. He tried to rewind his memories and play them back. Where did they stop? Where did they disappear? He couldn't remember. What was he—what had he been doing? What was

he

doing?

Where was this?

"!"

Feeling another's presence, Yuzuru startled badly and spun around. There.

Standing there was a tall male student dressed in the same tea blazer uniform as Yuzuru. He didn't know how long he had been there. Leaning against the white brick walls of the storehouse, he was looking over at Yuzuru. Then, with a cool, faint smile, he said, "Not bad."

"..."

Yuzuru stared blankly, eyes round as acorns. This time it was a face he recognized.

"...Takaya..." he called the name without thought.

A cloudless blue sky stretches out above the city as far as the eye can see. The Northern Japanese Alps, its graceful skyward peaks glittering with the last of the winter snows, look down over the town.

A May quickened by the refreshing [Kamikouchi](#) winds.

[Matsumoto City](#) in the prefecture of [Nagano](#) .

Shinshuu 's Matsumoto : a city surrounded by beautiful blue peaks, famous for being the

entranceway to mountain-climbing in the Japanese Alps, called the 'mountain capital'; a city grown up from its history as a simple castle town.

Within the city there are many historical landmarks such as Matsumoto Castle , one of Japan's national treasures, and the former Kaichi School.

The city can be called the cultural center of Shinshuu—and now Nagano. It is now second in industry and commerce and population in the prefecture, and its residential areas had spread into the suburbs.

And so.

They are Narita Yuzuru and Ougi Takaya, second-year students here in Matsumoto at the prefecture school Jouhoku High .

"Fish fillet and large fries. Oh, and a medium coke."

The employee at the counter, who would ordinarily not have seen high school students loitering around at this time of day, clicked away as she listened to the order. Takaya turned to look behind him.

It was a fast-food restaurant in front of Matsumoto Station.

They had somehow ended up coming back to the station, and, needing somewhere to calm down, had walked into one of their regular haunts.

Yuzuru, whom he had brought with him, leaned lethargically against a wall beneath a poster, his eyes shadowed.

"..."

Elbows resting casually on the counter as he took in the scene, Takaya turned back to face the restaurant employee.

"Add another coke."

The restaurant was emptier than they'd thought. —but then again, it was still before noon. The clock read just after eleven o'clock. Takaya carried the tray up to the second floor and dropped into a seat at a window facing the station terminal. He frowned up at Yuzuru, who had taken his seat after Takaya.

"What? Did you want the tacos instead?"

Yuzuru rested his chin in his hands and replied while gazing out the window "I had tacos yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

Takaya leaned forward unintentionally.

"'Yesterday'—I knew it! You were skipping school!"

"What's with the 'I knew it'? And besides, what are *you* doing here at this time of day?"

Takaya's lips tightened peevishly.

"I had self-study in Math, so I skipped out and came looking for you."

"Self-study? Why?"

"How would I know? Guess he was feeling sorry for himself or something and didn't show up."

"Didn't show up...? Oh, you've been fighting with the teacher again, haven't you! You shouldn't, you know! Math—that's the new teacher, Yoshikawa, right? Poor guy, getting bullied right from the start!"

"I'm not bullying him! He was the one shooting off his mouth."

"You're pretty scary when that hot-headedness of yours cools down."

"None of your business." Seriously annoyed, Takaya turned away and chewed at his straw. "More important is what's up with you."

"?"

"Why the heck are you skipping?"

"..."

Yuzuru's expression became slightly shadowed. Takaya waited patiently for him to speak, pushing the paper cup he had set down on the table to one side.

"Have you been stumbling around like this since two days ago?"

Yuzuru didn't answer.

"Geez..." Takaya sighed. "I called your house, and your mom said that you 'left for school like always'. I wonder what you're doing so I go looking for you, and I find you in a place like that, standing over four guys like you just beat them up. You're acting strange."

"Strange?" Yuzuru leaned forward a little. "I'm strange?"

"..."

Takaya cast a serene gaze on Yuzuru, then leaned his chin in his hands and looked out the window. "Well, you were always weirder than other people."

"—"

Yuzuru's lips quirked slightly in a half-hearted reaction. It had been obvious from earlier that he had not been in good spirits and had few words to say.

"We haven't changed classes yet, so it can't be start-of-classes blues. I guess that's the first time I've seen you fighting.... it's not like you. Something like that..." It didn't seem like the mild Yuzuru who usually stepped in to stop fights. "If there's something bothering you, why don't you try telling me? Even if I can't give you sage advice, I'll listen if it'll help clear your head a bit."

"Takaya—"

"So why have you been skipping?"

"I haven't really been 'skipping'."

"?" Takaya asked, "Whadaya mean? Then..."

"I don't know what's going on either," Yuzuru said, covering his

forehead with the back of his hand. "Like today—I was heading for school when I left the house, and something strange happened again—the

next thing I knew, I'd beaten up these guys I've never met before and had bruises like I'd been in a fight.

"Yuzuru?"

"It was like that yesterday, too. Everything was normal when I left the house, and the next thing I knew I was sitting in the middle of the street. And then the day before that..."

"And you don't remember anything in between?"

"..."

Yuzuru nodded.

Takaya couldn't help but draw in a breath.

"Then you..."

"I don't know what's going on at all. What's wrong with me? Have I really, seriously gone mad? I can't remember anything. That time I was really headed for school. What was I doing?"

"—"

"But that brawl earlier, I somehow don't think that it was me fighting.

I don't remember anything, and it seems like it was someone else who did it."

"...maybe."

"?"

"I don't think you'd provoke a fight with someone."

"Takaya." Yuzuru questioned him, clinging eagerly to his words, "What could it be? I don't know much about it, but could it be something like a split personality?"

"Split personality? Why would you suddenly become like that?"

"You're asking me why..."

Yuzuru, faced with Takaya's scowl head-on, closed his mouth. Even so, the look in Takaya's eyes was intimidating. Leaning forward deliberately, he began to question Yuzuru with the relentless intensity of a detective in an interrogation chamber.

"Was there anything that might have triggered it?"

Yuzuru, his index finger on his chin, turned his gaze slightly to the view outside the window.

"'Triggered'...?"

"...was there?"

"Ye...ah."

Pedestrians passed beneath the window, a steady stream from the

terminal's generous traffic. While gazing at this scene, Yuzuru made a "ku" sound, and his eyebrows drew together.

"A dream..."

"Huh?"

To Takaya's murmured reaction, Yuzuru responded as if speaking to himself, "I have this strange dream. When I woke up that day—that's when it started. And then things started happening like today."

"A dream? Do you remember it?"

"Yeah. Very clearly."

"What?"

Don't laugh."

"Why? Was it a funny dream?"

"You're always taking every opportunity to make fun of other people when they're being serious!"

"I'm not making fun of you! I'm not, so why don't you tell me what kind of a dream it was?"

"A dream where I'm engulfed in flames."

Takaya's eyes fixed on Yuzuru's face. "What?"

Yuzuru sneaked a look at Takaya's reaction, and the melancholy expression returned to his face. He replied, "It was like the aftermath

of a battle in a historical drama."

"The aftermath of a battle?"

"Yeah. The sky overhead is reddish-purple. A desolate-looking plain stretches out all around me, and there are the bodies of many fallen warriors and soldiers...I don't know what's happening, but I walk there alone. Torn flags, broken spears and the like litter the ground. The moans I hear are like a rumble in the ground. I try to run away from that strange place, but the dead soldiers swarm up and seize my leg."

Remembering the terror from that time, Yuzuru unconsciously wrapped both arms around himself.

"'Don't go'. 'You can't leave'. And then suddenly—" Yuzuru closed his eyes, expression strained. "Suddenly my body is engulfed in flames."

A french fry dangled forgotten from Takaya's lips.

Yuzuru's voice was like a moan as he continued.



"It's a pale purple flame, so hot that I really thought I would die. So hot that it didn't seem like a dream, and I would burn to death! That's what I'm thinking, when I wake up." Yuzuru sighed deeply. "It seemed frighteningly real."

"..."

Takaya, staring at Yuzuru, slowly chewed the french fry in his mouth.

From the stairs the chatter of children floated up. Takaya turned a cold gaze towards the noise. It sounded like a mother with her purchases taking along a group of children, all clamoring exuberantly. Undeterred by the vast amounts of free space elsewhere in the room, she sat down with her children in the seat directly behind Takaya.

Takaya rolled his eyes at them disgustedly, but Yuzuru showed no

reaction at all. He only stared down at the table, his face haggard and pale.

"..."

His gaze returning to Yuzuru, Takaya shut his mouth. Behind the table with the two silent people the children ran around noisily.

Clonk.

Unable to bear it any longer, Takaya stood up.

"Takaya?"

"Let's go, Yuzuru."

"Huh? Oh, wait. Takaya!"

Confused, Yuzuru chased after Takaya.

"You know...Yuzuru. "

Walking along the bank of the [Metoba River](#) which flowed through the center of the street, Takaya spoke to Yuzuru walking at his side.

Yuzuru, chewing a leftover piece of fish fillet, lifted his eyes.

"What?"

"Um, well, rather than having a split personality, doesn't it seem more like

you've been possessed?"

"Possessed? Me?"

"I mean, it's not anything like neurosis or the back-to-school syndrome, right? There's got to be some explanation for why you're having a hard time?"

"Maybe," and his gaze fell to the asphalt. "But..."

"I guess I can't laugh at you or call you an idiot, huh?" Takaya muttered, turning his gaze to the river's brooklet. The refreshing May breeze brushed against the cheeks of the two uniform-clad figures gently. Through the intermittent sounds of cars passing each other, the murmur of the brooklet reached their ears.

Takaya said, "Weren't you paralyzed in class the other day? It was probably the spirit of the girl who committed suicide ten years ago, right? Before that there was the ghost of the grandma who died in a traffic accident that followed you around, right? And when you take pictures on vacation you'd always catch a spirit or two. You're seriously—you know, what's it called. I'm not touched by psychic phenomenon at all, but a sensitive like you—wouldn't you be a prime target?"

Finishing the last mouthful of his drink, Yuzuru's brows knit. "What do you mean by 'target'?"

"I dunno, but haven't you been possessed by a spirit? Something like an [itako](#) or a medium?"

"Don't put me together with them."

"What you said about that strange dream you had, what was it? Like a historical drama? An [onryou](#) from the [Sengoku Period](#) , maybe?"

"No way..." Yuzuru said, laughing, but...

Suddenly.

He stopped in his tracks.

"?"

Noticing, Takaya halted too. Yuzuru was staring at a point somewhere ahead of them.

"Yuzuru?"

"Takaya. Over there."

Takaya followed the direction of Yuzuru's gaze. On the small red-painted bridge across the Metoba River.

There stood a young woman in school uniform gazing down at the river surface.

Long straight black hair flowed down her back. She seemed not too far from Takaya and Yuzuru's age. Her sailor uniform was a brilliant navy blue with a cobalt blue ribbon—a uniform they had not seen around here before. But it was mid-morning—not a time for ordinary high school students to be loitering about.

The young woman held nothing in her hands; she only stared down at the river with an impression of perfect stillness. Her expression was without animation, her eyes blank, her face pale.

Something was strange.

Yuzuru gazed at the young woman fixedly as if something had drawn him to her. When Takaya noticed and, thinking it dubious, was on the verge of calling out...

Yuzuru stepped forward as if his feet had been bespelled.

Eyes wide, lips opened slightly, he took another unconscious step forward. It was as if someone was moving his legs like a puppet.

Without its assistance he seemed to stagger. Then, another step—

"!...Yuzuru!"

"Huh?"

He came back to himself. Takaya grabbed his wrist. He shouted close to his ear, "You idiot! What're you doing? !"

"Takaya."

"Going after some chick—that's not like you!"

"..." Yuzuru made a slight sound and closed his eyes. Then. A startled noise came from the young woman on the bridge, and she looked their way.

Noticing, the two turned their eyes back to her.

There were about fifteen meters between them.

Looking over at them, the young woman's eyes filled with tension. Their blankness was replaced by glowing, and expression suddenly flooded back

into her face. She stared at them where they stood on the pavement. But that gaze was not an ordinary casual look.

It was an eerie look not from this world.

(...what the...!)

A feeling of bizarre tension.

An intense disorientation as of having entered another dimension.

And then.

White light radiated from behind her.

He gulped, suddenly lost for breath.

(What in the world is—)

A squeak.

Yuzuru took an unconscious step back.

The young woman stared at them.

Like a noble of ancient times looking down upon a commoner, her expression was full of a strange feeling of coercion which pinned them

motionless beneath her gaze.

Suddenly there was a trembling in the depths of her eyes.

"?"

Takaya was the one who reacted.

Her expression became layered with complexity as the sense of coercion disappeared. In its place a feeling of peace spread across her face, and her eyes opened wide. A faint murmur escaped from her shapely lips.

"...thou..."

"Huh?" Takaya's eyes widened.

The young woman moved towards them slowly. Her lips moved once more, saying something he couldn't hear.

In that moment.

"!"

The young woman's body trembled. "Oh!" Takaya and Yuzuru moved towards her; in that instant—!

Whoosh!

"What the!"

Pale fire burst from her body.

With an ear-piercing scream, the young woman's body ignited.

"Wh...! The hell!"

The young woman writhed, enveloped in flame. Her body burned with a sound like a gigantic gas burner. Screams ripped from her throat. The pale flames—no, purple. —purple!

"You've gotta be kidding me. Hey, Yuzuru! YUZURU!"

Yuzuru, his face convulsing with tremors, didn't react to Takaya's shout.

"Hey! You!"

Taking off his blazer, Takaya rushed over to the young woman. Within the flames the young woman writhed violently. Takaya, beating wildly at the fire in an attempt to put it out, suddenly stopped.

It wasn't hot...

The fire gave off no heat.

(What? ...an illusion?)

Purple flames. Intense, eerie flames...from nowhere.

"Dammit!"

Biting his tongue, he wrapped his blazer around the young woman's body and restrained her as she flailed violently. "Yuzuru!" he shouted. "An ambulance! Snap out of it and call an ambulance!"

Yuzuru didn't move.

"Yuzuru! Can't you hear me? YUZURU!"

Passersby gathered to see what was going on. Takaya shouted,
"YUZURU!...damn it! YUZURU!"

<<The seal on the [Maenduka](#) has been broken. Let us assemble. Let us return to the land of our birth, o my brothers. >>

Chapter 2: Alarm Bells

A middle-aged doctor came out of the hospital room and said, "She's finally calmed down. She's sleeping, thanks to the medicine we gave her. But you..." The doctor asked frankly, with a dubious expression on his face, "You said that she was enveloped in flames, but I see no traces at all of burns either on her body or on her clothes. Perhaps you mistook what you saw for something else?"

Perhaps you mistook it?

The doctor's words from yesterday echoed in his ears.

Takaya pondered, mechanical pencil in hand, staring vaguely at the lines of mathematical formulas lined up on the blackboard.

Eventually the girl had fainted, and an ambulance had arrived to carry her away. Yuzuru had gone home afterwards, saying almost nothing at all

He had not come to school today either. When he'd called Yuzuru's house, he'd been told that Yuzuru had been feeling unwell since last night and was probably sleeping.

That fire...hadn't it been the fire that Yuzuru had told him about?

"Perhaps you mistook it?"

No, he hadn't. He'd seen it with his own eyes—the purple blaze that had

engulfed the girl.

(Nothing burned in the flames. It didn't leave any traces. It wasn't hot.)

Then why had something like that happened so suddenly...?

There was one thing more that worried him: Yuzuru's reaction. Yuzuru appeared to have also seen the flames engulfing the girl. Even if that wasn't the case, something inexplicable had happened to his body.

Yuzuru's dream.

Purple flames. Yuzuru and the girl.

(Was there something...?)

The bells rang for the end of Fourth Period.

"Hey, wait! I said wait, Ougi-kun!"

He turned at the school entrance to the sound of someone calling him.

One of the female students came running down the corridor after him with a broom in her hands. The penetrating voice, as he'd guessed, belonged to a classmate, Morino Saori.

"I heard you earlier. What do you want?"

"Why didn't you stop if you heard me, you lunkhead!" [\[1\]](#)

"I'm not on cleaning duty today."

"No!" Her glossy bobbed hair swinging, the shorter Saori looked up at Takaya. "No, that's not it....stop that, you!"

"What?" Takaya narrowed an eye. "What did I do?"

"In class you keep glaring at the blackboard—you're scaring Yoshikawa-sensei half to death! Are you looking for a fight or something?"

"...the hell?"

He'd been thrown together with this girl with her childish-seeming moon face at last year's committee for the athletic festival, and ever since then she'd become a friend who one way or another was always following him about and rushing into arguments with him. But there was a reason for that. It was obvious enough that it didn't take much guessing at—in other words, Takaya was a means for her to get closer to Yuzuru.

"Are you going to Narita-kun's house now?"

A strange power lay confined in her when it came to Narita-kun. Her aim was Yuzuru, Takaya's good friend. Her motives were so transparent that he found it rather boring.

"Nope."

"So what's wrong with Narita-kun? Is he really skipping school?"

"Look..."

Saori crossed both arms in front of her chest and regarded Takaya.

"I know all about it. You skipped class yesterday to go looking for him, didn't you?"

"Oh? How did you know?"

"Because my mom saw you in front of the station yesterday. You were walking with Narita-kun."

"... How does your mom know what we look like, anyway?"

"She met you during the athletic festival, remember? It's not every day that you see a clean-cut young man like Narita-kun with a savage like you, so meeting you once is enough to leave an impression that you don't easily forget."

"Who're you calling a savage?"

"Anyway, is there anything the matter with Narita-kun? He's not sick, is he? Is there something bothering him? Or..."

"..."

He looked at Saori for a little while without replying. She deliberately met his gaze and batted her eyes at him. Having no choice, Takaya replied, "He's home sick today."

"Home sick? So he has a flu or allergies or something like that?"

"... I dunno, but he's at home resting."

"Really? Then he'll be okay tomorrow? Are you taking proper notes for him?"

"You know—" Takaya scowled moodily. "Sorry, but I'm in a hurry. If you're worried about Yuzuru, why don't you go visit him yourself?"

"No—no way! I can't do that! But it would make me really happy."

"Ah...right."

"What 'ah, right!' Then where are you going, Ougi-kun?"

"Hospital ."

"...you're not coming down with anything, are you?"

"Where'd you get that idea? I'm going to go visit someone. Though I have no idea who she is."

"What do you mean?"

"None of your business. See ya."

"Oh, wait!"

She threw her arms around his arm. He turned, startled.

"What now? Look—"

"I'm going too! I'm coming with you to the hospital, so..." Saori smiled brightly. "Let's go visit Narita-kun afterwards, okay?"

The door opened quietly with a dull, heavy sound.

The girl was sitting up in her bed.

"..."

Seeing her, Saori made a small sound behind Takaya.

"Ah...no way. You're joking. Is she your girlfriend?"

"I told you it's someone I don't know, didn't I?"

"What's with that? Then who is she?"

"You're so noisy. Shut up for a bit."

"It would seem that she doesn't remember anything."

At the words of the doctor nearby, Takaya's eyes—no, Saori's, too—widened.

"Huh?"

The girl on the bed, wearing something like a water-hued robe, sat with a blank expression on her face.

"What do you mean?"

"That she recalls nothing. Not even her name or where she came from."

"Then, um, she has amnesia?"

"I suppose you could call it that. We've tried talking to her, but she's been in that nearly comatose state. She'll be back to normal in a little while."

"Then—"

"We can't say anything more until we've given her a more detailed examination. But I think, since we don't know her identity at this point..."

The doctor picked up a light pink handkerchief which had been lying on the nightstand and showed it to them. "Yuiko" had been embroidered on one corner in white thread.

"Yuiko'?"

"I don't know if it's her name or if it has nothing at all to do with her, but it's the only thing we've been able to find. She wasn't carrying a wallet or anything else. And she's wearing a uniform that's not from around this neighborhood, so—"

He crossed his arms and tilted his head. Takaya gazed at the words on the handkerchief the doctor had handed him. Then he said tentatively, "Yuiko...san...?"

Then—

The girl who until then had been sitting there so blankly widened her eyes a little as if in response to his voice. "Ah," everyone thought, as the girl looked up at them quietly.

"..."

When she caught sight of Takaya, a gentle animation revived in her expression.

"...You are the one from yesterday..."

It was the first time she had spoken. It seemed that she had come back to herself. The doctor peered into the girl's face.

"Do you remember now? How do you feel?"

"Yes. ...Yes, I'm fine. I feel fine physically, but..."

Her expression as she responded was perfectly natural, and her appearance was that of an ordinary young woman. Keeping his voice calm

with an effort, Takaya spoke.

"You don't...remember anything?"

"I'm sorry. But I heard that you saved me yesterday. I must have—"

"You were engulfed in fire."

The girl startled badly, her face stiffening.

"You're still going on about...!"

"My friend and I both saw it. You suddenly burst into flames—you were entirely enveloped by the fire. Who are you? What the hell was that purple-colored fire...!"

The girl clutched at her head with both hands.

"Stop it. Don't say it. I'm scared. I...I'm afraid of that!"

"That'—what is it?! Are you talking about the fire? Or...!"

"It's not me! It's not! It's not!"

"What are you talking about! Explain it to me...!"

"You!" The doctor held him back. Takaya wrenched against the doctor's restraining grip. The girl cowered on the bed.

"What the hell, man, let go of me!"

"Please don't agitate the patient. You're only disturbing her. Beyond this is —"

"She knows something! I have to ask her! No matter what!"

"Ougi-kun!"

Saori grabbed the tail of his blazer and looked up at him.

"I don't know much about what's going on, but this is enough for today. I feel sorry for her!"

"You feel *sorry* for her...!"

The mocking words stuck in his throat. The girl, thoroughly intimidated, hunched her thin, tense shoulders.

"Ougi-kun..."

Takaya barely managed to control himself.

"Doctor..."

"?"

"I'll leave her to you...please take care of her."

"Ah? Ah, yes."

"Wait up, Ougi-kun."

Lowering his head in apology, Takaya quickly stepped out of the room.

BAM!

He suddenly, violently struck the corridor wall with his fist. Takaya glared at the wall as if it were something past enduring.

"What are you so irritated about?"

"... I'm not irritated."

"You are. What's wrong? You're being strange, Ougi-kun. Why are you so mad about?"

"..."

"What happened? Who is that person? What kind of a person is she?"

"I don't know. I wanted her to tell me..."

A sound of pain escaped him, and his eyebrows drew together.

(It's happening again. ...What in the world is she?)

Something strange inside his body.

A jarring sense of slowly-approaching disaster like the sound of alarm bells
He had felt it ever since he'd met Yuiko.

A burning in his chest...!

"Damn her! What is this!"

"Wait, Ougi-kun!"

"What! What do you want to say!"

Though she was completely confused by Takaya's fury, Saori put her life on the line to pacify him.

"Calm down, Ougi-kun! Explain it to me. Calm down and explain it to me, okay?"

"Morino..."

"You need to be level-headed about this; otherwise you're going to miss even the simple things that you can normally catch, right? So—"

Takaya stared at Saori for a moment, but finally closed his eyes and exhaled slowly.

"...all right."

"Please take care of the house," his mother called before going out.

She had said that she was going to the theater with some tea friends from the neighborhood.

Yuzuru was sitting in bed in a sweatshirt with his feet sticking straight out. He put down the magazine he'd been flipping through and stared at the fractured light coming in through the half-open blinds.

From downstairs came the sound of a dental turbine drilling into teeth.

Yuzuru's father had opened a dental office, and as the only child he was of course expected to inherit the practice. But after four days of absence from school, he couldn't think about being the successor to the Narita Dental Office at all.

(...What on earth could it be?)

He hadn't slept since yesterday.

He was afraid of falling asleep. He'd probably end up with that dream again if he did, and he'd finally given up on going to bed altogether.

And—that girl—

Yuzuru cowered on the bed with his arms wrapped around his knees.

(I don't understand anything...)

What was happening? Around him, within him? There was an atmosphere of

something alarming revolving around him—that was all he knew.

That battleground scene in his dream—what on earth did that mean? And then, the girl from yesterday...

(Who...was that?)

A girl he didn't know. But when he thought back, a curious emotion throbbed in his heart. An emotion spreading painfully in his chest.

Almost as if she reminded him of someone he had parted from in the distant past. That was it.

(As if I've missed her dearly—...)

This feeling. Why did he feel like that?

(I want to see her again), he thought.

If he did, he could probably ascertain that feeling. But at the same time.

He should absolutely not meet her. He thought as well.

(Something's strange. It doesn't seem like it's me.)

Corpses stretched out on the reddish-purple ground holding out one clinging hand after another...

He felt now as if he had missed them as well, like that girl. They were appealing to him. They were without a doubt beseeching him.

What should he do, then?

<<*Something only you can do.*>>

We've been waiting for you.

(For me...?)

Yuzuru raised his head.

(No, you're wrong. Not for me!)

He turned, taken aback by a terrible feeling, and swallowed a gasp.

He didn't know how long they had been standing there, but there in his room were the hazy shapes of armored and helmeted warriors!

"...oh...!"

They gazed at Yuzuru from the corner of his room. Their armor was crumbling into ruin. Looking at him...no, they had no such things as eyes. Beneath the helmets were—

The empty eye sockets of skeletons!

<<*We have finally found you. Lord...*>>

The heavy voice shook the room. Another armored warrior appeared in front of him with a popping sound. Yuzuru gasped.

Where are they ghosts...? The ghosts of warriors?

Yuzuru froze.

<<*Now please lead us.*>>

Their voices seemed to resound from beneath the ground. One by one the skeletons of warriors gathered and slowly approached Yuzuru with heavy treads.

"...Ah..."

The wall was at his back, and there was no place for him to run from the crowd of approaching warriors. Overwhelmed, Yuzuru trembled with terror.

"...No..."

<<Why do you reject us?>>

"No... Don't come near me."

<<You are the one who called us. Now—>>

"I didn't! Don't come near me!"

The crowd of warriors pressing towards him cut off his shriek.

<<Lead us!>>

"!"

He hid his face in his hands and screamed.

Takaya...!

Shyourp!

<<!>>

Suddenly the air split apart, and one of the warriors was sucked away.

(...huh...?)

The crowd of warriors turned. Drawn by their gaze, Yuzuru also looked in the same direction.

Someone stood there at the open door.

(...What...?)

He didn't recognize the face. It was a tall, slender man fortified by a suit of black. Seeing Yuzuru's face, he gave a low sigh of relief.

"Somehow it seems I've made it in time."

Quick as lightning the skeleton warriors began to move, arousing an eerie atmosphere within the room.

"!"

Sensing the violent "aura", Yuzuru leaned forward.

Don't...!

A groaning rumble rose from the ground. Something like black smoke spurted up from beneath the warriors' feet and flared like flames.

The warriors simultaneously directed their hostility towards the man.

Hostility—no, murderous intent!

Yuzuru yelled, "They're going to kill you!"

"So it's as bad as I'd thought."

"...? Look out!"

With a roar the warriors attacked. The man reciprocated with only the dagger-edged glint in his eyes.

"bai"!

The warriors froze with surprise at the sudden sound. They stood in place as if paralyzed. The man held his hands together before his chest and chanted in a strange language.

"[Noumakusamanda bodanan baishiramandaya sowaka](#) ."

A slow shimmering amber-colored blaze welled up from the man's body.

(No way...!)

The amber blaze flickered to envelope the man's body, and soon a white light began to glow from his hands, which were set in a symbolic gesture. The man continued to intone the incantation in a low voice. The light brightened rapidly until it glowed like a ball of plasma; in the instant the white sphere formed completely around his fists—!

"[Hail Eight-Sword Bishamonten](#) !" he cried loudly.



"Evil spirits be gone! Lend me thy strength!"

He opened his hands in the direction of the rigid spirits.

"<<Choubuku >>!"

Incandescent light.

The brilliant blaze released from his palms flashed into the four corners of the room.

"!"

Yuzuru closed his eyes involuntarily. The sound from the white light grew and swallowed the warriors.

Yuzuru covered his ears. The light and sound, swallowing the shrieks of the warriors, grew in strength until he thought his eardrums would

burst.

At its peak the man pressed his hands together in prayer.

"—spirit exorcism complete."

The flapping of birds' wings rose through a sound like falling sand.

Then the light...disappeared with the warriors and their howls of bitterness.

"..."

Only Yuzuru and the man dressed in black remained, and dead silence fell upon the room.

The man quietly separated his hands and opened his eyes.

"...Are you okay?"

"—"

The calm voice and expression released Yuzuru from his paralysis, and he took his hands away from his ears.

The black-clothed man was...around twenty-seven or twenty-eight. He bore deeply chiseled features, sharp, wild eyes, an impression of refined masculinity.

"Please forgive me for entering without permission, but it was a fairly perilous situation."

"...That's...okay..." He finally found his voice again and asked hoarsely, "Who are you?"

"Someone who has been watching over you since yesterday."

"Huh?"

"There were indications of a great many warrior spirits moving in this area, so I thought perhaps... It seems that I somewhat underestimated 'his' power."

"His?" Yuzuru paled. "You mean—are you possibly talking about the one who's possessed me?"

"You remember being possessed?"

"...Then I've really been possessed by a spirit?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

Yuzuru answered with a great deal of confusion, "There've been strange things happening recently...it's like inside me is someone who isn't me...and I have this strange feeling."

"..."

The man's eyes narrowed, and he covered his mouth with his hand.

"Could it be that from time to time you've found yourself doing things which made it seem like you have a split personality?"

"That's right! How did you know?"

"I see..." The man sighed. "The consumption has gone deeper than I thought. The aura you're releasing has also become stronger than

before. The situation has advanced fairly far."

"What do you mean? If you know anything, please explain it to me! You know everything, don't you!"

"Not quite 'everything'... But in any case..." He opened the cuffs at the wrist of his left hand. Beneath was a silver-colored bracelet.

"Please give me your left hand."

Yuzuru presented his left hand as requested, and the man touched it with his index finger while chanting an incantation. He ended the incantation with a light yell and carefully clasped the bracelet around Yuzuru's wrist. It was a bracelet made of silver with exquisite arabesque fretwork; Yuzuru eyed it dubiously.

"It's...something like a seal," the man said quietly. "It doesn't have the power to entrap the spirit which has possessed you, but it will stop him from taking over. At least we can avoid having you lose control."

"Lose control?"

"When the invading spirit becomes too strong and the body forgets its original owner. Actually, the dead who feel 'his' presence have already started gathering around you."

"...around me...?"

Chills ran down his back. Then the warriors from before had also been seeking 'him'...

"Who is 'he'? Is it someone I know?"

"—"

The man was silent for a moment before responding, "Do you know of the destruction of the Maenduka?"

"? What?"

"... No, it's probably better that you don't know."

"Te-tell me! Who is 'he'?!"

"One so terrible that it would make your knees go weak to know him.

This bracelet will act as a talisman such that the spirits of those warriors will not be able to approach you for a little while. In the meantime we'll take care of the invading spirit somehow. So until then you must absolutely not remove it."

"—"

"But it seems that you also carry a considerable amount of 'power'. Why would *that person* once again be at the side of someone like you?"

"?"

Once again something he didn't understand.

"Though it's not necessarily that person's fault that 'he' set his gaze on you."

Murmuring to himself, the man started to walk out the door.

"Oh, wait a minute...!"

"?"

"Who in the world are you?"

"—"

The man narrowed his eyes, then smiled for the first time.

"My name is [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) . We will meet again soon."

Sunset spread above the peaks of the Northern Japanese Alps.

The setting sun gazed down upon the residential streets of [Matsumoto](#) .
Having gotten off at the bus stop, Takaya and Saori were walking down the long hill road towards Yuzuru's house.

"I just can't believe it."

"What?"

"Something like that can't happen. A person suddenly going up in flames? It just. Can't happen!"

"You're an ultra-realist, huh? Then you explain it."

"Yeah, but I'm an [O-type](#) !"

"What does blood type have to do with it?"

"My point is that fire wouldn't just spout out of nowhere."

"But I saw it with my own eyes. You can tell me that it can't happen, but it did happen, and you can't just negate that fact so simply."

"You were seeing things. Maybe you need new contacts?"

"Don't wear any."

"Anyway, something like that is impossible. What can't happen can't happen."

"Ugh—..." Takaya groaned.

Light filtered from the setting sun enveloped all the houses along the path and dyed them a rich scarlet. Somewhere an early cicada was singing.

Takaya and Saori arrived at Yuzuru's house—Narita Dental Office. Saori hurriedly asked, "Um, wait. Do I look weird? Is my ribbon crooked? How about my hair?"

"Sheesh, gimme a break —"

"Hmm?"

Their eyes were drawn to a man walking towards them from the direction of the house. He was dressed as if for a funeral, in a black suit and a black necktie. The sharp glint in his eyes followed the sharp line of his nose.

"Oh my, he looks so cool!" Saori shrieked, but Takaya observed him dubiously. He didn't think the man looked like someone here for dental treatment. A strange feeling was growing within him—a malaise, one could call it. What was it, this emotion? A heated feeling towards this man. ...heated?

It seemed that the man had noticed Takaya as well.

Their eyes met.

(—!...)

Takaya stopped in his path, assaulted by an eerie sensation. A sensation that shivered up through his body from the soles of his feet.

(...what...)

Takaya stiffened.

They passed each other.

In that instant.

Something went through him.

He turned. The black-suited man was getting into the car parked behind him.

"Hey you, wait!"

Naoe stilled at the sound of Takaya's voice. Without turning completely, his glance flowed down to the feet of the one who had

called out to him...

The light of the setting sun reflected from the windows of every house.

The cicadas' singing stopped.

Naoe climbed silently into the car. The engine started with a discharge of exhaust fumes. The car drove away.

"What's wrong, Ougi-kun? Let's go!"

Responding with some vague reply, he began walking again. For a short while he kept looking over his shoulder after the car.

Another day came to an end over the [Matsumoto](#) plains.

footnotes

[1] What Saori actually calls Takaya is "Suttokodokkoi!", which is apparently an amusing piece of street slang from the Edo Period.

Chapter 3: Reunion

The stillness of the morning was shattered in the Morino household that day at 7:50.

Saori half-galloped, half-tumbled down the stairs with a noise like falling thunder. Her amazed mother was waiting in the dining room.

"Good morning. Are the stairs still intact?"

"Ah, probably. Good morning, Mom."

"It's Saturday, so I made toast. Do you want your eggs sunny-side up or scrambled?"

"It's okay, I need to go! Just hurry up and toast some bread—bread! Eeeek! I'm going to be laaaaaate!"

"Really now..."

Her mother picked up the coffee pot.

"You've been rather strangely perky since you came home yesterday—"

"Don't nag me! You'll drive away Narita-kun's voice from my ears, and I won't hear him anymore!"

"Hmm? So you went to visit him? At his house?"

"Yeah! But he seemed fine!"

"I see. Then I wonder if he was coming back from the hospital when I saw

him the other day."

"But you know, he was wearing this gray sweatshirt yesterday, and his hair was..."

"I'd love to hear the report, but didn't you have to hurry?"

"I do, but...listen!" Saori demanded, raising her voice. "Has the bicycle puncture been repaired yet? If I have to take the bus, I'll need to hurry even more."

"Oh my."

From the front door came the sound of her father's voice: "I'm going!"

Her mother pattered over to see him off. She heard: "Next, from [Yamanashi Prefecture Enzan City](#) . The famous graveyard of [Sengoku](#) warlord [Takeda Shingen](#) 's family shrine [Erin Temple](#) was struck by a giant meteorite."

"Huh...?"

The bread came flying out of the toaster with a *ching*.

On TV, a strangely energetic reporter on location had been jabbering away since morning. A large crowd of people who seemed to be standing in the middle of the gravesite were chattering; behind them was a large, gaping-wide hole.

"...The crater is fairly large: around twenty meters in diameter, five meters deep. It appears that Lord Shingen's tomb took a direct hit. The fragments of the meteorite which seems to have fallen here have yet to be found... Now let's hear from the temple personnel its state at the

time."

Saori bit into her toast while gazing at the TV screen.

(Why'd it have to fall right on the tomb?), she thought, and glanced at her watch. "Yeek, it's already this late? Oh no!"

Gulping down her coffee and finishing off her bread, Saori stood up from her chair.

"Thanks for breakfast!" she called, before galloping away. The bell on the doorknob swayed with the closing of the door. The TV continued talking alone to an empty dining room.

"...furthermore, though many eye-witnesses in the center of Enzan reported seeing the meteor and its meteorite, the Meteorological Agency and Astronomical Observatories reported that they did not observe a falling body of the like at that time last night..."

The bus, jam-packed with students arriving with not a minute to spare, finally arrived at the bus stop in front of the school. One female student was shoved out of the avalanche-like mass of students descending from the bus. She staggered and stumbled to the edge of the sidewalk.

"Hey, that's dangerous! Stop pushing!"

It was Saori. Although she was shouting at the tops of her lungs, the

students, who were on the verge of being late, walked on with darkening expressions as if they had not heard.

The dumbfounded Saori sat down right on the road. Her hair and ribbon were both rumped. Her face half-crumbled as if she were about to cry.

"...that's so mean...!" said Saori, who had always commuted to school by bicycle. (Incidentally, there are unusually many bicyclers in [Matsumoto](#), such that it seems to have gained the nickname of "Japan's China.")

She had been going to school these past few days on foot since the bike had been punctured, but it wasn't possible today because she had slept late. *I'm going to be late!* she was thinking, when by chance someone jumped down from the bus which had just stopped in front of her—

"Morino-san?"

She made a surprised sound, straightening. That voice just now...

She turned her head to look up, resigned, her face flaming. There was a male student bending to peer down at her.

"Did you trip on something? Are you okay?"

It was Narita Yuzuru.

(No...no way—!)

She covered her mouth with her hand, her face flushing a deep red.

(I'm so lucky!)

It could perhaps be said that her wounds were a badge of honor.

Yuzuru held out his hand.

"Can you stand?"

Yuzuru's hand. Was it really okay to place her hand in this hand that she had dreamed of? In the midst of her confusion Yuzuru took her hand

"Here you go."

Saori was pulled upright. She gazed at Yuzuru almost in a daze.

(...this hand. I'll never wash it again.)

"Thank you for coming to visit me yesterday, Morino-san. I'm sorry for the bother."

"Huh? Oh, it's no problem..."

There was no "sorry" involved. Rather, she wanted to express her gratitude to him for being sick. Saori smiled. "It wasn't a bother at all. So are you feeling better? Since you came to school today."

"Yeah."

And Yuzuru smiled his usual bright smile.

"Nothing strange happened last night, and I was able to come this far this morning, so I think I'm all right."

"That's great. Then you've recovered now?"

"? From what?"

"The back-to-school disease."

Yuzuru staggered, caught off guard.

Saori looked around curiously.

"Oh, speaking of which, where is Ougi-kun? Don't you always come to school together?"

"He must be sleeping late. He can ride his bike if he's in a hurry, so he'll be here soon."

Saori gazed at Yuzuru's profile, entranced. The vibrant glistening green of the poplars along the fence dazzled her eyes, but at this moment she had no room to spare to be moved by such things, not when Yuzuru's glass-bright eyes were right at her side.

(Oh, his eyelashes are so long...)

That small discovery made her happy.

The bell had rung a long time ago, but Yuzuru didn't seem to care, and of course neither did Saori.

"?"

Yuzuru's gaze seemed to be fixed on some point a long way away.

"What's wrong?"

"Hmm? ...Oh, sorry."

There appeared to be something on his mind.

"There's something I want to ask you... Morino-san, you took Japanese History, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then I wonder if you might recognize it..."

"What?"

"Well, there was this symbol on a flag that I saw in a dream..."

"A dream? Ougi-kun was telling me about a dream you had the other day..."

"That dream was like being in a historical play...now that I think about it, perhaps the symbol on that flag was a clue. It was probably a family crest or something like that."

"What did it look like?"

"It was a diamond-shaped... How do I explain it?"

He opened his bag, took out a notebook and ballpoint pen, and smoothly drew the symbol for Saori.

It was a diamond divided into four smaller diamonds.

"Hmm? This is..."

"Do you recognize it?"

"This is the 'Takeda Diamond', isn't it?"

"Takeda Diamond?"

"Yeah. The Takeda family crest. I think that's it."

"Takeda..." Yuzuru leaned forward involuntarily. "You mean—[Takeda Shingen](#)?"

"That's right. I've seen it a lot in stuff like the [Taiga Drama Series](#) , so I know it pretty well. The '[Huurinkazan](#) ' flag is also pretty famous, but it seems that this one was used a lot as well."

"Takeda...huh?"

"Someone so terrible that it would make your knees go weak to know him." Those were the words that man from yesterday—yes, Naoe—had left him.

The symbol from his dream was the symbol of the [Sengoku Period](#) Takeda Clan's warflag—was that to say that the ghost warriors from yesterday were also Takeda's warriors? Then...

(Then the "he" who's possessed me really is one of the Takeda?)

They wanted "his" awakening. And if they were the Takeda warriors, and "he" was their master, the master of the Takeda Clan...?

Then could it really be that Shingen, the person in question, was...

(...but why...?)

"Narita-kun!"

Startled, Yuzuru raised his head.

A crowd of students dressed in navy-blue uniforms were loitering near the white plaster wall next to the school gates . Navy-blue blazers and gray trousers—they weren't students belonging to this school. A strangely menacing atmosphere emanated from them; the style of their hair, their attitudes, suggested somehow that they were waiting in ambush. Among the group of delinquents one smoking a cigarette noticed Yuzuru and Saori.

"...hey."

He poked his companions, and they all turned towards the two.

Saori quickly hid herself behind Yuzuru. One student with a band-aid sticking to his face walked out from the bunch to stand in front of Yuzuru. Laughing unpleasantly out of a mouth warped by bruises, he said, "Good morning."

Yuzuru, face stiffening, responded, "...good morning."

Students from another school in front of his school gates. They were the West High students "he" had provoked a fight with the other day.

At around the same time, a black GSX250R drove up to the parking lot at the back of a gasoline stand two hundred meters away from the school. Stepping on the accelerator very lightly to stop at the wall, he put the shift on neutral and cut the engine.

Takaya took off his helmet and shook his head lightly. Straddling the bike, he took a look at his watch. Eight thirty-five. Oh well, so he was late.

"...Can't help it, I guess."

He should've eaten a proper breakfast if he was going to be late anyway. While he was busy regretting that—

"?"

He turned around, feeling the unexpected presence of someone behind him. Then his eyes widened slightly.

Standing obliquely behind him was a man dressed in a black suit.

"..."

The man was looking this way; Takaya returned his gaze warily. It was the man he had passed in front of Yuzuru's house yesterday.

He got off the bike slowly.

"What do you want?" Takaya asked in a low voice.

Naoe continued to look at him appraisingly without responding.

Takaya narrowed almond-shaped eyes.

"Is there something you wanna say to me or what?"

Instead of a reply—

Suddenly the branch overhead of a tree growing along the road snapped.

"...!..."

Takaya looked up reflexively. Then he immediately spun around to face Naoe.

Naoe gazed at Takaya silently.

"!" Takaya's eyes widened.

With a sound like a plucked bowstring, the pebbles underfoot floated upwards to about ten centimeters in mid-air.

"Wh...!"

His voice choked off mid-exclamation.

As if a magnet were pulling at the pebbles, they rose close to a height of two meters and quietly hovered in the space between them.

Naoe's eyebrows lifted slightly.

Zing!

Suddenly the cloud of pebbles cut through the air and came flying straight at Takaya.

Zoom!

"Ungh...!"

The pebbles flew past Takaya's averted face like arrows, grazing his

cheeks. Then they fell like rain to the ground.

Takaya turned startled eyes back towards Naoe. Naoe, without any change in expression, crossed his arms and gazed back in his direction.

Takaya swallowed.

(What...the hell...is he...!)

"Why don't you use your <<powers>>?"

It was the first time Naoe had spoken.

"I will not hold back next time."

"!"

The pebbles rose into the air once more. A kind of blood-thirst rose in Naoe's eyes, through which the motionless Takaya stood reflected.

"Now!"

Takaya hid his face behind his arms. The pebbles advanced in their attack.

They were going to hit him point-blank!

Or so he thought.

But the pebbles didn't touch Takaya at all.

(...?)

He half-opened his eyes to take in the situation. The pebbles had stopped dead a few centimeters in front of Takaya's face.

(What—)

With a clattering sound the pebbles fell to the ground.

"Why did you call out to me yesterday?" Naoe's tone, in contrast to his actions, was coolly serene. Takaya glared at Naoe. Then he cautiously lowered his arms.

"You stank of Yuzuru."

"..." Naoe smiled faintly. "I see."

"Did you finish off the warriors who attacked Yuzuru yesterday with that magic trick you used just now, too?"

"So you've heard about what happened yesterday?"

"—"

"...Then that makes it easier."

"What in the world were they?"

"There is something I need to show to you."

"? To me?" Takaya asked bluntly, "Not to Yuzuru...?"

"To you."

"Show me...what?"

"You will know if you'll come with me." Naoe turned gracefully on his

heel. "Yuzuru-san has a right to know, but...Ougi Takaya—"

"...!"

"You have an *obligation* to know."

Tension built in the space between the two.

"You will come, will you not?"

"..."

Takaya answered in a low voice, "Yeah."

"We owe you for the other day."

The six West High students moved to encircle Yuzuru and Saori.

Saori asked in a small voice close to Yuzuru's ear, "Narita-kun, who are these people?"

Yuzuru bit at his lips slightly. He, too, had guessed their reason for being here. They had probably been waiting in ambush to settle the score. And their numbers had multiplied. It seemed that this time they were determined to not lose—that much was obvious from the way they extruded smugness. The West High students called out to the two they surrounded in an overly-familiar manner.

"Hey man, didja bring your girlfriend?"

"You don't wanna show her something as shameful as this, do ya?"

Sweat dampened Yuzuru's forehead.

All of them were bigger and tougher than him. One against six odds was worse than just *bad*. For him to go up against them was...

"What, you scared? Where's that swagger from the other day?"

Rustle rustle.

The West High students were shortening the distance between them. Yuzuru looked around wildly, protecting Saori behind him.

(...What should I do?)

If only Takaya were here...

"We're going to settle this! Once and for all!"

"I"

"It's payback time! Let's do it!"

Oh no...!

A swinging fist. Yuzuru clutched at the bracelet around his wrist. In that moment—!

"That's enough, you low-lives."

All the West High students turned simultaneously towards the voice from behind. Yuzuru and Saori also stared in that direction.

A young man in a trenchcoat and jeans stood there.

Hair as glossy as if it were wet, black sunglasses, light-gray, half-length trenchcoat unbuttoned over a tank top. Slender as a rail, he was around twenty...no, probably a little older. The young man was so pale and beautiful that it was enough to send chills down one's neck.

Everyone stopped breathing for a moment.

"What the hell do you want, asshole?"

"You wanna piece of us?"

The youth gazed at the excited crowd serenely and laughed deep in his throat.

"You small fry are going to get hurt if you try to act like big fish."

"What the hell did you say?"

"Fuck you, motherfucker!"

A glint flared deep in the youth's eyes behind the sunglasses as the West High students hurled themselves into the attack.

"How dare you lay a hand on him? I shall teach you your place!"

Crack crack crack!

"Waaaaah!"

Screams blended together with a sound like bones breaking.

The West High students stumbled and fell prone to the ground, writhing.

"Ah, it hurts! It hurts!"

Some clutched their arms, some clutched their shoulders, their legs, and thrashed about on the ground in agony. The color bleached out of Yuzuru's face, standing motionless as he gazed at the scene of the students rolling around wildly screaming in pain.

(He...broke their bones?)

Swallowing hard, Yuzuru looked at the youth, who was gazing with a cold eye at the students thrashing about on the ground. He didn't even raise an eyebrow at the screams that made Yuzuru want to cover his ears.

"Hyyyyyyaaaah...!"

"For-forgive us...!"

The students, their faces blanched with terror, shrank away cowering from the youth.

"Waaaah—!"

One of them took off like a shot, and in an instant the others were following at a stumbling run.

"Weaklings," he spat, and turned. Yuzuru's face stiffened. The terrified Saori was hiding behind his back. The young man fixed his eyes on him, then slowly took off his sunglasses.

Beauty enough to make one's breath catch.

He suddenly fell to one knee in front of the wide-eyed Yuzuru.

"...Wh..."

"My Lord," he called out to Yuzuru in a sonorous voice.



"I, [Kousaka Danjou Nosuke Masanobu](#) , knew in my heart that this long-awaited day would come."

"I"

"[Kousaka Danjou](#) ?!" Saori exclaimed in a small voice, and Yuzuru glanced at her before looking again at the youth.

"Ah...um..."

Yuzuru was very much worried.

"I don't know what's going on, but please get up. I don't really..."

"...?"

"Are you perhaps friends with the person called 'Naoe-san' from yesterday?"

"...Naoe...?"

The youth suddenly started and raised his head, then without warning grabbed Yuzuru's left hand.

"Ah!"

"!...That's!"

Seeing the <<talisman bracelet>> around Yuzuru's wrist, the young man's expression changed completely.

"So he has been sealed."

"Wait...ow!"

"Take it off! Take that thing off right now...!"

"Let go of me!"

Pak!

Yuzuru jerked away from Kousaka's grasp and yelled, "Who on earth are you?"

"..."

Kousaka's cold gaze slid from Yuzuru to a point above him, and in a stifled voice muttered, "Is this their work?"

"...?"

There was the smallest amount of strain apparent on Kousaka's face, and he smiled thinly.

(Ugh...)

He felt a chill down his back.

"C-Class is about to start. Let's go, Morino-san."

"Ah...okay..."

Kousaka stared after the departing Yuzuru and Saori with an enigmatic smile hovering on his lips.

"Narita-kun. That person's still there," Saori said, looking down at the school gates from a window gazing out at the blue peaks of the Northern Alps on the third floor corridor. It was the break between Second and Third Period, and the hallways echoed with the clamor of student voices.

"..." Yuzuru was also staring at him. "Who is he? He said he was called Kousaka or something..."

"That's right!" Saori exclaimed next to Yuzuru, her voice rising. "He called himself Kousaka Danjou Nosuke Masanobu, didn't he?"

"Danjou No... yes, that's right, he did. Do you know anything about that?"

"Kousaka Danjou —that's one of Takeda's twenty-four generals. He was one of Takeda Shingen 's most trusted vassals, excelling in both martial and literary arts, and

was the most handsome of all the Takeda. He was originally the son of a country samurai, not one of the Takeda, but his abilities earned him Shingen's approval, and he rose to prominence. That's the historical Kousaka Danjou , but I wonder why that person would give it as his name?"

Yuzuru stood shock-still, hardly breathing.

"And this morning on the news, they said that a meteor destroyed Takeda Shingen 's tomb."

"A meteor?"

"Yeah. And it sounds like you dreamed about the Takeda Diamond... It's pretty strange, isn't it? I wonder what's going on..."

Saori looked up at Yuzuru.

"Speaking of which, that person called you 'my lord', didn't he? By 'lord' he would've meant Shingen. Why would you be Shingen? What is that supposed to mean?

(Is that what he means?)

Yuzuru looked down at Kousaka standing by the school gates.

Beneath the green leaves of the poplar trees, Kousaka stared up at him fixedly.

A May breeze swept down the corridor. Yuzuru covered the bracelet with his right hand protectively. Even sealed and unable to appear, 'he' was certainly inside Yuzuru.

"So until then you must absolutely not remove it."

Yuzuru tightened his grip.

Why did the murmur of the trees arouse such unease within him?

Chapter 4: Vestiges of a Dream

The car exited from National Highway 18 and turned onto the narrow road running along the Chikuma River . Nagano City started from the opposite bank of the river at the boundary of Koushoku City .

The basin here had been called Zenkoujidaira since ancient times, and around this region was Kawanakajima .

The Cefiro pulled up, kicking loose gravel into the Chikuma River riverbed. It slid to a slow stop, doors opening, and Naoe Nobutsuna and Ougi Takaya alighted.

"..."

Overhead, the distant clear blue sky spread out boundlessly. Beyond the clear stream of the Chikuma River , the town of Shinonoi could be seen. And even further in the distance, the Togakushi Mountains . For a moment they stood in the invigorating river breeze and the gentle murmur of the river flow.

"Where is this...?"

"To the voices of whips we solemnly cross the night river / Dawn looks upon the fangs of my thousand men."

"?"

Takaya turned to look at Naoe, who was gazing at the river.

"It's a verse from a Chinese poem written by Rai Sanyou , a historian of the Edo period. It's a poem about the battle that was fought here four hundred years ago—do you know of it?"

"The Battle of [Kawanakajima](#) or something?"

"Yes. The battle fought between [Sengoku](#) warlords [Takeda Shingen](#) and [Uesugi Kenshin](#) . Though the [Chikuma River](#) flowed a bit more along the foothills of the mountain to the

south...ah, yes. From around here you can see the place where 'to the voices of whips we crossed' as it stands now."

And Naoe cast down his eyes.

"That battle was so fierce that even in the [Sengoku](#) Period, there was no other battle with more casualties. Its aftermath seemed like a painting of hell."

Takaya made a dubious face. "'Seemed like'—you make it sound like you were there."

"..."

Naoe listened to the sound of the river for a moment without replying, fixing his gaze beyond the river.

"Surely each of the nameless warriors who fell here one after another had their own lives. Can you feel it?"

"..."

"And yet something as monumental as their deaths is buried within the footnotes of history. Certainly, it's true that it was a time when lives were perhaps taken more lightly—or it could be that human lives were always thus. Or is it that conversely, history would not have been

created at all without the accumulated weight of all those deaths? If so..."

"..."

"I'm terrified to the marrow of 'history's worth'."

"...What the hell are you..."

Naoe quietly turned to Takaya. "But their sympathies, their resentments, their grieves—those things truly existed. The emotions left behind in this land by the dead—where do you think they have gone?"

"—the emotions of the dead?"

"Yes." Naoe slowly pointed at the flow of the [Chikuma River](#). "Please look for yourself."

"?"

Takaya turned his gaze to the river.

It was not at all deep—a brooklet shallow enough to be crossed.

"Can you not see it?"

"Can I—"

It's just an ordinary river, Takaya was about to reply, when his eyes suddenly widened.

The clear flow of the river seemed to become a little muddied.

(...Wha...?)

He thought at first that it was a trick of the light, but that wasn't it. The muddiness spread from the center—a red taint which dyed the clear flow of the river scarlet in the blink of an eye.

(...what the...)

Takaya, doubting his own eyes, gasped.

The [Chikuma River](#) had become a vivid shade of red.

Red water, as if freshly-spilled blood flowed there.

Freshly-spilled blood.

"It can't be..."

It was a river of blood!

"It is," Naoe finished Takaya's thought in a frighteningly calm tone.

"The blood of too many people flowed in this river. This blood is their heart, their emotions."

"..."

"This is how the emotions left behind by the dead stain the rivers and mountains—emotions which can never be erased."

"..."

Takaya looked at Naoe, then returned his eyes to the [Chikuma River](#) once more. Somewhere far away, a skylark was singing.

"Shall we go?"

Prompted by Naoe, Takaya also walked away.

All the while looking back at the [Chikuma River](#) over his shoulder.

Getting on the car once more, they drove along the single track of Nagano's electric railway for some minutes and crossed at the railroad crossing near the small station called [Iwano](#).

The railroad crossing was like a farm road in the middle of a field; a construction site spread beyond the field, and bulldozers and dumps came into view bit by bit. Beyond that was a dirt-colored mountain whose bareness was obviously due to human construction.

The road continued towards it.

"Hey, are you planning to take me to the construction site?"

"Over there?" Naoe responded, gripping the steering wheel and glancing out the windshield. "Can you see the tunnel exit on our right ? I believe it connects to the freeway. Until recently it was just a mountain."

"Do you know this area?"

Naoe turned the steering wheel to the right without replying.

"This is a portentous era, isn't it?"

"?"

"Even the mountains and rivers permeated with emotions left behind by past generations are disappearing so easily at the hands of people. And the natural surroundings of our homes are changing as well."

"..."

"There is probably no longer anything in existence that has stayed constant through the ages."

Naoe's self-derisive smile evoked mixed feelings from Takaya. The car rounded endless curves, ascending the bare mountain shaped like a promontory jutting out of the level ground.

It was not a tall mountain. The slope was completely bare of trees, and packed hard as if with a trowel. This mountain was [Saijo-yama](#). During the Battle of Kawanakajima, it was where [Uesugi Kenshin](#) had shaped his battle formations.

Even though the slopes of [Saijo-yama](#) were completely bare, a luxuriant forest grew at its summit. They ascended to the summit and came to a stop near the top.

Tall Japanese cedars surrounded a plaza-like area. An old temple stood in isolation—a plaque declared it to be the [Shoukon Temple](#). Behind it stood a large stone monument. ...there was no other sign of life.

"[Saijo-yama](#) ..." Standing in front of the sign, Takaya skimmed it in a glance "The place where [Uesugi Kenshin](#) pitched camp?"

"Yes."

"Why did you bring me here?"

Once again Naoe did not reply. At the tip of the plaza, on a section of the promontory stood a wooden framework lookout platform designed like a signal tower. It looked new and had been constructed recently, in 1988. Naoe ascended the platform.

The platform overlooked [Zenkoujidaira](#) . Mountains surrounded the earth-colored fields spreading out directly below them, the nearby [Chikuma River](#) , and the town of [Shinonoi](#) beyond, contrasting with the blue of the sky overhead.

"...wow—..." Takaya said wonderingly. Naoe, standing beside him, pointed towards the north-west.

"That green, gently-sloping mountain is called [Chausu-yama](#) .

It is where the Takeda army first made their battle formations. After that the army rotated in a circle—" Naoe turned his gaze to the east.

"Can you see where the trees are thickest along the tracks at the foot of this mountain? That was where Takeda set up his stronghold—[Kaidu Castle](#) . The two armies glared at each other for about ten days here..."

"..."

"The day before the battle— Noticing from here that there were many more campfires lit in the vicinity of [Kaidu Castle](#) than usual and knowing that it bespoke of a catastrophe, the Uesugi

army deployed its troops immediately to counter Takeda's plan. Lord [Uesugi Kenshin](#) —in other words..." Naoe turned to face Takaya. "...your father, Kagetora-sama."

"...!"

Takaya swallowed his words at the sincerity in Naoe's gaze.

A wind from the mountains blew through the space between them.

They stared at each other in silence. Minutes passed.

"...huh..." Takaya spoke, breaking the silence, his tone mocking. "What are you talking about? Is that supposed to be a 'past life' or something?"

"No." Naoe paused, picking his words carefully. "I'm speaking of 'this life'."

The wind stopped.

They stared at each other for another long moment: Naoe motionless, Takaya frozen in place.

"What do you...?"

Naoe gazed at [Kawanakajima](#), narrowing his eyes against the glare. "What I speak of is something that you, too, should know of already..."

"?"

"Do you know what the word '[kanshou](#)' means?"

"[Kanshou](#)?"

"When people die, they go to 'the other world'. Their souls are purified, and the memories and personality of their past life are erased before they are once more born into this world."

"..."

"Human souls are like glasswork. The glass melts within the fires of purification, losing its original shape; then, when it is cooled, a new shape is formed. Souls are like that as well. After they die, people's souls are purified, and are then reborn. Past life, present life, future life... It continues in an endless, ever-changing cycle. And purification purges all of a soul's memories. It is because of this purification that people cannot remember who they were their past lives. After death, a person's soul is purified without fail, and for the sake of their reincarnation, their memories, personality, and the acts in the life just past are all cleansed away."

"..."

"But there are some among the dead who refuse purification." Naoe's voice hardened. "The first of these are called the [onryou](#) .

Because of the bitterness or pain or overpowering regret of their deaths, they unconsciously deny the purification...the loss of their memories...and remain in this life as incorporeal spirits. And the second are..."

"..."

"The second are those who willfully refuse purification. After their bodies die, they choose to possess another body in embryo form while unpurified, wresting that body from its rightful owner and making it their own. By this means they begin a new life. In other words..." Naoe

said, his eyes dagger-edged, "They are the 'kanshou'.

"..."

Takaya's expression was unreadable. Naoe continued, the wind flapping against him, "Since their souls are not purified, they retain their memories. In this way, though they change bodies, it could be said that they continue living for hundreds of years, even until the modern era."

"...You think that a story like this..."

"Do you...find it hard to believe? And that would probably be the end of it, were you anyone else. But *you* must not disbelieve it."

"What do you mean?"

"I am not speaking in the third person."

"What?"

"In other words, I am speaking of you and me."

"...!"

"My name is Naoe Nobutsuna , heir to Naoe Yamato-no-Kami Sanetsuna hereditary vassal of Lord Uesugi Kenshinafter death, I accepted the guardianship of Lord Uesugi Kagetora , who had undergone kanshou at the command of God-of-War Kenshin, and became a kanshousha myself.'

Takaya was speechless.

Uesugi Kenshin ... No way...

"This body is the twelfth that I have possessed. During these four hundred years, I have been a [kanshousha](#) of the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) with Lord Kagetora, subjugating the evil spirits of this world. Lord

Kagetora was the adopted son of Lord Kenshin; after death, he became the general of the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) in the name of Lord Kenshin..."

"..."

"You are he of whom I speak, Ougi Takaya."

Takaya scowled at Naoe.

His clenched fists shook uncontrollably.

"... Are you making fun of me?!"

Takaya grabbed fistfuls of Naoe's collar.

"Did you really expect me to believe a story like that? Stop screwing me around...!" he shouted, before suddenly gulping down the rest of his words.

There was a strangely sorrowful light in Naoe's eyes, though Takaya's fists were still clenched in his collar.

"... You... Really don't remember, do you?"

"... I..."

His hands loosened. "What the hell am I?"

Naoe slowly turned his face away and closed his eyes. Takaya stared at Naoe, silently demanding an answer. The wind wrapped around them

both.

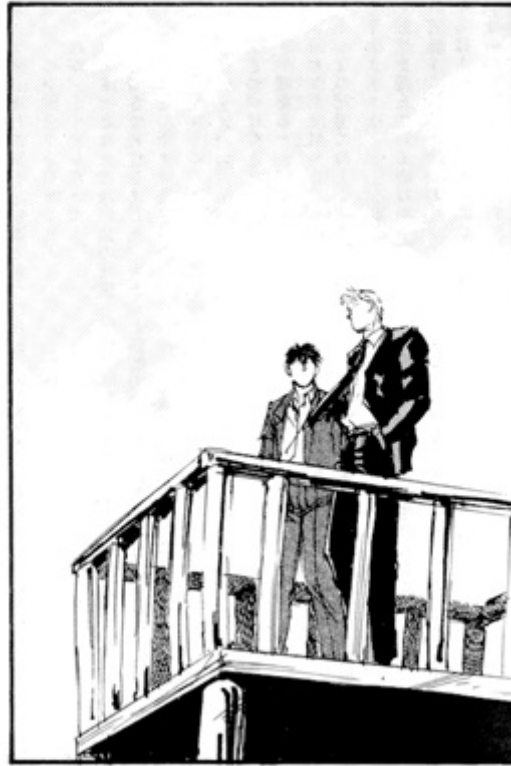
Naoe mouthed the words soundlessly: *Four hundred years ago...*

"In that chaotic era of civil war, everyone frantically sought to expand their own land and power. Lord Kenshin alone of them all fought not for his own selfish desires, but for justice and order. The Uesugi army punished those with wicked hearts in Heaven's name and became an army which crushed evil and spread truth, fighting for the sake of 'the path of righteousness' and 'beautiful order' in this world."

Naoe continued wistfully, "After death, Lord Kenshin became a God of War. At length the land moved towards unity under [Toyotomi](#) , then [Tokugawa](#) , and the era of peace that Lord Kenshin had dreamed of finally became reality. ...however."

"..."

"There are many scattered spirits from the [Sengoku](#) era who continue to wander here in this world, trailing malice behind them. These vengeful spirits hate the peace of this world and seek to disturb it, using any chink or blemish to overthrow that peace. Lord Kenshin, as a God of War, called upon those spirits loyal to the Uesugi Clan to embark on a mission to pacify these vengeful souls in order to prevent that from happening. They were named the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) whose supreme command was entrusted to his adopted son, Lord Kagetora."



"And that's supposed to be me?"

"Yes. A year after Lord Kenshin's death, you were defeated in a battle of succession by [\[\[Uesugi Kagekatsu \]\]](#),

similarly adopted by Kenshin, and died at the age of twenty-six. Since you had always been strong in spiritual powers, Lord Kenshin called upon you to take up this role. You remained in this world as a [kanshousha](#), exorcising the [onryou](#) of the [Sengoku](#) era. In addition, you are the only one with the authority to call upon the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) should the need arise, so you have maintained your memories throughout these four hundred years with [kanshou](#). And I have been beside you throughout all these years as your guardian.

"... That's impossible," Takaya muttered dazedly. "I have no memories of any of this—Kagetora or Kenshin or... You said that [kanshousha](#) should remember their past lives, right?"

"None of us remember our past lives. We only remember our lives before

we became [kanshousha](#) ..."

"And I'm saying that I don't remember any of that! This Kagetora or whoever it is you said—that's not me! I'm Ougi Takaya, and I have no memories of being anybody else or anything like that...!"

"Perhaps. But strictly speaking, it's not that you don't have the memories. You should carry those memories within you—you've only forgotten them."

"What the hell are you talking about! Do you have any proof at all? If you're going to say that I'm Kagetora, then prove it!"

"Proof—" Naoe murmured, and smiled slightly with downcast eyes. "That is what you...require from me?"

"..."

"In the ten times that you have performed [kanshou](#) , I have never once been mistaken about your identity. Whatever shape you assumed."

"But it's not me."

"No," Naoe insisted forcefully, "there is no mistake. It is you. Kagetora-sama."

Takaya scowled. "...I don't have any memories of it."

"I—" Naoe frowned very slightly, "—know the reason for that."

"..."

"We took a severe blow in a battle thirty years go. Both you and I

temporarily perished. I performed [kanshou](#) ,

but afterwards, no matter how many times I called out to you, you never answered. I thought that I would never see you again. I was truly afraid."

"..."

"There has been...so much tragedy in your history."

"Mine? Why?"

Instead of replying, Naoe bit his lips lightly. Takaya stared at him.

Seconds passed in silence before Naoe seemed to come to a decision and

opened his mouth to speak.

"Right now the world is heading towards an unseen [Sengoku](#) era."

"Unseen...[Sengoku](#) era?"

"In the shadowed parts of the world the [onryou](#) from the [Sengoku](#) are on the verge of beginning another war for domination of the world."

"!" Takaya's eyes widened. "What in the world are you...!"

"It seems the [onryou](#) are seeking another chance; sustained with the energy of their own

hatred, they wish to re-enact the civil war that began four hundred years ago."

"Wh-what do you...mean?"

"<<Yami-Sengoku >>.

Those warlords that history saw defeated could never accept their defeat and so began another war to rule over the entire country. They could not accept the fact that they had already lost. It seems that Yuzuru-san has somehow become embroiled in that battle."

"Yuzuru...!" Takaya demanded sharply, recollecting himself. "You know what's going on, don't you! Tell me! What's happening? What the hell were that dream of his and that woman from the other day?"

"I don't know the connection between them, but..." Placing his hand on the railing of the viewing platform, Naoe replied, "It seems that Yuzuru-san has been possessed by the spirit of one of the warlords."

"One of the warlords?"

"Take a guess?"

"Look—"

"I had another purpose for bringing you here to Kawanakajima today. That's your hint."

"Another purpose for bringing me here, huh..."

"He, too, wanted to rule the country in his previous life."

Takaya's face gradually stiffened. "No way. It can't be..."

"It is exactly who 'it can't be'," Naoe calmly divulged. "The spirit of the Sengoku warlord Takeda Shingen is finally on the move. Our mission this time is to exorcise the spirits of Takeda Shingen and his followers, who

were probably the ones who revived him."

"!" Takaya was at a loss for words.

The spirit who had possessed Yuzuru was that historically famous Sengoku warlord—[Takeda Shingen](#) !

"... You're lying to me."

"I have never lied to you, and nor will I start now."

"Why do you keep..."

"People have been terrified of [Takeda Shingen](#) 's [onryou](#) , so to speak, since ancient times; in fact, for many years after his death, Shingen's [onryou](#) was fairly violent. In the end, he was put to rest by his own high priest, [Kaisen-Kokushi](#) . However..."

"...?"

"Do you know of Shingen's [Maenduka](#) ?"

"[Maenduka](#) ? What's that?"

"There are many places in the country that could be called [Takeda Shingen](#) 's

tomb. ...this was apparently for the purpose of carrying out his last will and testament, to 'conceal my death for a period of three years'.

...one of Shingen's tombs is located in a place called [Iwakubo](#) in [Koufu](#) . There Shingen's body was cremated in secret at the mansion of [Tsuchiya Uemon](#) . It was said that the villagers of that time called that place "[Maenduka](#) " and were afraid to approach it—" Naoe's eyes narrowed. "But just a few days ago, someone destroyed that tomb."

"Destroyed the tomb?"

"Yes. But in reality this tomb called the [Maenduka](#) was the place where [Kaisen-Kokushi](#) entrapped Shingen's [onryou](#) ."

"Entrapped..."

"In other words, someone has broken the seal upon the [Maenduka](#) ."

"For what purpose?"

"That's fairly obvious," Naoe said. "So that Shingen can take over the country."

"Who would do that?"

"I will have to make a guess."

"..."

"The seal was broken on the Sixth of this month."

"The Sixth is when Yuzuru started skipping school. And I guess that's when he had that dream, too?"

"It is said that when possessed, those who are especially sensitive will sustain some harm to their spirit; perhaps the dream that Yuzuru-san saw was of this kind. Well, it's not impossible. After that, the spirits bound to various places who are part of the Takeda Clan also began gathering power and are moving quite vigorously in order to unleash Shingen's might."

"Moving to do what?"

"To gather around Yuzuru-san."

"Seriously?"

"Have you heard the story about the evening that a meteor fell on the Takeda house temple, [Erin-ji](#) ?"

"I said that I hadn't..."

"That's true. It happened then. That wasn't really a meteor—even though it was described by eye-witnesses as a huge falling ball of fire—it was actually a host of [onryou](#) ."

"!"

"Feeling the signs of Shingen's revival but not knowing where he himself was, they must have been desperately searching for him."

"What did you do to Yuzuru yesterday?"

"I confined him."

"Shingen, in Yuzuru?"

"Yes. Only, I couldn't really hope to contain him with the tools I had, so I gave Yuzuru-san himself a hint. I made use of the fact that he carries a great deal of spiritual power and directed him to bind the spirit that had possessed him. ...Even though I don't think he himself is aware of it..."

"So it's really Yuzuru himself who's suppressing Shingen?"

"Yes. The <<talisman bracelet>> I used is actually to aid Yuzuru-san; part of the [Hakku Darani](#) of the [Ryugonshu](#) that [Kaisen-kokushi](#) used to seal Shingen into the [Maenduka](#) is engraved upon it. I think that if Shingen should conceal himself

within Yuzuru-san's shadow in his fear of that spell, Yuzuru-san will also find it easier to <<bind>> him. But even so, if we don't complete the exorcism as soon as possible..."

"Could something happen?"

"Shingen's spiritual power is immeasurable. If he should temporarily surpass Yuzuru-san's abilities, I don't know if he will be able to go on a rampage and destroy the <<spirit binding>>. If that happens, then Yuzuru-san himself will be in danger. In the worst-case scenario, Shingen could dispossess Yuzuru and complete [kanshou](#) .

Takaya's breath caught in a startled gasp. "What do you mean by dispossess?"

"I mean that he could drive out Yuzuru-san's soul and completely take over the body for himself."

"Take over...?"

"In that case, Yuzuru-san would no longer be Yuzuru-san."

Takaya was stunned. "Then what would happen to Yuzuru's soul?"

"With no place to go, he may become a wandering spirit or perhaps he would simply move on and be cleansed; in any case if the spirit is

separated from the body too long, it becomes the same condition as 'death'."

"__"

"That's why we must hurry. Unfortunately, I don't have the ability to exorcise someone of Shingen's spiritual power, so I've called on an ally who does have that power. We will certainly perform the exorcism in any case." Naoe cast Takaya a rueful look. "Though your old self would have been able to perform the exorcism without any trouble."

"Look, how many times do I have to say that I'm not Kagetora?"

Naoe's sigh seemed to say "I guess it can't be helped."

"I will go back to guarding Yuzuru-san. Thanks to the bracelet's [dharani](#) , I don't think the [onryou](#) will be able to approach him, but there is one person who must absolutely not come into contact with him."

"What? You mean the guy who broke the seal on the [Maenduka](#) ?"

"Most likely."

"Someone you know?"

"..."

Naoe returned Takaya's gaze. "It's just that that person shouldn't have the <<power>> to break the seal upon the [Maenduka](#) by himself."

Takaya looked at him dubiously.

"In any case, in order to save Yuzuru-san as well, we must carry out the

exorcism of Shingen and his followers. Kagetora-sama."

"You're so pig-headed! I told you I'm not him!"

"You will assist me, will you not?"

"..."

The two stared at each other for a few moments, submerged in silence—

Lips twisting reluctantly, Takaya brushed his hair out of his eyes. "Only because it concerns Yuzuru..."

"So you'll help me."

"But! I'm only going to lend a hand because I'm Yuzuru's friend. I'm not buying any of this bull about tigers or cows, 'cause I am absolutely not it!" [\[1\]](#)

"... I see."

Naoe nodded, a slight, calm smile hovering on his lips. Takaya, noticing it, turned away sullenly.

"Then there is a favor I must ask of you now."

"?"

"The young woman you met the day before yesterday. Please keep an eye on her."

"So she really is involved?"

"She has also been possessed by some spirit."

"Whose?"

"That I do not know. But for some reason it feels quite dangerous. Please do not let Yuzuru-san see her again."

"... I got it. But."

"What is it?"

"That exorcism thing or whatever—what is it? Is it that Buddhist ceremony where you burn incense or something?"

After a moment of silence, Naoe spoke. "It's a bit different from the type of exorcisms that you generally hear about."

"?"

"All that we can do for the spirits who remain in this world is to cleanse them of their lingering regrets and resentments so that they will want to move on. However, in too many cases that is not possible, and we must send them to the other world by force."

"And that is...<<choubuku >>?"

"It is 'the power to send spirits to the Underworld'," Naoe replied.

"Broadly speaking, the power we use as weapons can be separated into two kinds: <<nendouryoku >> and <<reinamiryoku >>. <<Nendouryoku >> you saw earlier. It's external—the power to affect a substance. <<Reinamiryoku >> is the power to influence the internal state—namely, the soul—of your target. <<Choubukuryoku >> is of the latter kind, but is it a power bequeathed to us by our guardian deity, Bishamonten ."

He cast a sidelong glance at Takaya. "Do you wish to see it in action?"

"...huh?..."

"For example, the [onryou](#) behind you, who has been targeting us for some time."

"!"

He spun around without thought.

His breath caught.

Standing there at the top of the platform stairs was the skeleton of a warrior in armor and helm!

"Ugh...!"

(No way...!)

The skeletal warrior drew its sword and walked towards them. Naoe's voice never wavered from its cool calm. "[Jibakurei](#) of [Kawanakajima](#) . Judging from its hostility, a warrior of the Takeda Clan."

<<—!>>

Raising its voice in a silent shriek, the ghost of the dead warrior brandished its sword and attacked!

"Uwah!" Takaya recoiled.

Naoe joined his hands in a ritual gesture.

"Ari nari tonari anaro nabi kunabi !"

The sword sliced downward. Naoe thundered, "bai)!"

Shyurp!

It happened in an instant. The air rent apart, and the warrior was sucked into the crack. Afterwards smoke drifting in the space it had stood—the skeletal warrior had disappeared.

"...ah..."

"What you saw just now was *choubuku* ." Naoe turned to Takaya. "Don't think that this does not concern you."

"—"

Takaya gazed dumbfounded at where the warrior had been.

"...huh..." After a moment his lips twitched into a thin smile. "Pretty interesting," Takaya grinned boldly. "Fine, I'll come with you."

"..."

Naoe gave a slight, quiet smile.

"I am grateful for your company."

footnotes

[1] A play on Kagetora's name, 景虎, the second character of which means "tiger".

Chapter 5: Likeness

The girl on the bed turned her head toward the door at the knock. "Yes?"

The door opened, and a face quickly peered inside. It was a girl wearing a tea-colored blazer.

"Can I come in?"

"You are..."

"Heheh—. Good afternoon!"

The girl who had come to visit Yuiko with a bouquet of flowers in hand was Morino Saori.

"When we came yesterday, I thought the room needed a bit of color—it didn't even have any flowers...so... Mmm... Is there a vase?"

"Um..."

"You look better today. But it's boring to just sit here by yourself, right?"

Yuiko only looked at her blankly.

"Huh? Oh, right...I haven't even introduced myself yet. I'm Morino Saori. I came with Ougi Takaya yesterday—he's my classmate."

"Ougi...Takaya?"

"Yeah. He's pretty unsociable, so I guess he's kinda scary at first sight, but he's not a bad guy. And he's not bad-looking either, right?"

His personality is kinda aloof, and he's 5'8", so a lot of people probably secretly like him. What do you think, Yuiko-san?"

"???"

"Ah, what am I talking about? Anyway, have you remembered anything more since yesterday?"

Yuiko, eyes downcast, murmured a listless reply to Saori's question: "Not really..."

Straight black hair whispered against her cheeks, across a profile which seemed as beautiful as that of a Japanese doll. After a moment of gazing at that face, Saori said forcefully, "It's okay! Cheer up! You'll definitely remember soon! Definitely!"

"That's true. I'll remember soon."

Saori, understanding immediately the effort Yuiko had put into her smile, thought that she was very brave.

Yuiko accepted the bouquet charmingly. "Thank you for everything, Morino-san, for coming to visit me even though I'm a complete stranger."

"It's really not..."

"These are such pretty flowers. I was actually a bit lonely, so I'm glad that you came to see me."

"..."

"I was feeling depressed—I don't know anyone here. ...So I'm very happy that you came."

Saori's expression darkened a bit. Yuiko, noticing, asked, "? What is it?"

"Ah...it's nothing. I was thinking that you have such clear eyes."

"Oh my. Why do you say that all of a sudden?"

"Nevermind. Just a bit of self-loathing."

In actuality...

Saori had not really come to visit Yuiko. The true reason was something Yuzuru had said: "I want to see that girl from the other day."

Saori had been startled beyond words by that one side comment. That Yuzuru "wanted to see" that girl was a grave situation indeed. Especially when "that girl" was the amnesic beauty from yesterday! Saori had unhesitatingly rushed to the hospital. Her strategy was to put up a guard against that possibility. In other words, (Palm Yuiko-san off with Takaya-kun, and hide Narita-kun!) was her battle strategy.

Though in actuality, what Yuzuru had meant was that he wanted to find a lead on ascertaining who it was that had possessed him, but Saori had misunderstood him completely. Saori had continued to smile, but inside she was setting up for a fight...

But before Yuiko's brave smile those feelings gradually shifted, and Saori became completely dejected.

(I am such a horrible person...!)

Really, if she thought about it, this just wasn't the time to be talking to Yuiko about guys. She didn't even know who she herself was. Dejected and sad, in that genuinely uneasy state she must have been truly glad to see Saori. Even in such a serious situation Saori hadn't been thinking of Yuiko at all...

(I'm being so narrow-minded.) Saori berated herself. (I guess this is what people mean by "love is blind".)

... Somehow that doesn't seem quite right.

(That's right! This isn't the time to be thinking about guys. This is when I need to help Yuiko-san. This is when friendship between girls takes precedence over love!)

Saori seemed to gain a mysterious energy.

"Yuiko-san, I'm here for you, so cheer up! You can't give up!"

"Saori-san, you're such an interesting person."

"Ah...really?"

Yuiko laughed with such charm that Saori couldn't hope to emulate it.

"Aah....say..." Saori, meaning to follow up on yesterday's events, looked outside. "What great weather. It's such a waste to be just sitting in this room."

"?"

"You're much better now, right? If the doctor lets us, it'll be a great chance—I can take you sightseeing around [Matsumoto](#) !"

"Oh! Really?"

"From your uniform, it looks like you're not from a school around [Matsumoto](#) .

You probably won't get your memories back if you just stay in the hospital, but they might be stimulated if you go out and look around."

Yuiko's expression suddenly brightened. "Oh, I want to go, I want to go! Please take me!"

"Then how about tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes, tomorrow!"

"If they don't let you, then we'll slip out!"

"All right!"

"Then it's decided!"

"Yay, this is great!"

The excited two clapped their hands gleefully, having found completely kindred spirits in each other.

Saori stayed until six o'clock to chat with Yuiko about this and that.

"I'll see you tomorrow!"

"Okay. Thank you for coming today."

"Cheer up even if you're feeling lonely, okay? See you!" Saori said, and walked out of the room.

The door slowly closed.

Yuiko saw her off...then suddenly murmured, "Kousaka...?"

The curtain behind her fluttered in the wind. Outside the window—

Beneath the ginkgo tree a young man in a trenchcoat had been standing for an indeterminate amount of time. He wasn't exceptionally tall, but his skin was fair as to almost be transparent. He was truly beautiful enough to send shivers down one's spine. He softly removed his sunglasses and lifted eyes like black crystals in her direction.

Kousaka Danjou Nosuke Masanobu called out to Yuiko: "My Lady."

Yuiko tossed a sharp glance out the window. Her expression had already become so cold that it was as if she had put on a Noh mask . She asked in a low voice that sounded like it belonged to someone else altogether, "What news of our Lord?"

"Our Lord currently seems to be...confined within his spiritual vessel."

"What...!" She cast him a dagger-edged look as terrifying as a demon's glare. "Explain thyself!"

"It appears that there are those who have sensed him within the spiritual vessel and have moved to counter it."

"What..." For a moment Yuiko seemed to sway in shock. "Who hath done this?"

"I do not know. However, there are many who fear our Lord's revival and eventual domination of the <<Yami-Sengoku >>. It would not have been out of the question for any of them to have acted."

"Hmm..."

Kousaka eventually told her of noticing the <<talisman bracelet>> guarding Yuzuru, which prevented him from further approach.

"Is the seal a strong one?"

"No. From its appearance, the bracelet only has the power to protect, not seal. Perhaps it gives the spiritual vessel a suggestion that allows him to use his own powers to <<bind>> our Lord. Even if it is due to a suggestion, it seems the vessel has the <<power>> to confine our Lord within himself. We must punish him for it later."

"Of a certainty," Yuiko laughed lightly. "That one seems to possess unusual quantities of spiritual power. I know not how thou camest to chose him as the spiritual vessel, but without that power he would be useless. Such is the purpose of the vessel; if he doth not match our Lord in power, the choice would have been meaningless."

"..."

"We finally achieved the unraveling of the seal upon the Maenduka by uniting our <<power>> with that chit Yuiko's. Yuiko is our descendant, and it is natural that we chose her for our endeavor."

However, Yuzuru was by thy judgment, and he is a worthy spiritual vessel. I shall speak well of thee to our Lord, Kousaka Danjou ."

"I am grateful..."

"This day hath arrived at last. We must help our Lord subjugate this country at all cost and correct its erroneous ways."

"I hear and obey," Kousaka replied in a clear tenor voice. "There is no one but our Lord to rule the country. Thus shall the order of the <<Yami-Sengoku >> be completely altered."

"We shall crush those foolish onshou . They shall know the true ruler of this country."

"Yes."

Looking over at Kousaka, Yuiko said quietly, "Thou hast been the one to guide me since I awakened from my temporary sleep, Kousaka. I am grateful."

"If it were not for you, Lady, wife of Lord Shingen, we would not have been able to revive him."

And then he named her: "Sanjou-no-Kata -sama."

"..."



Yuiko said, her expression dignified, "Is that so."

And Yuiko—no, Sanjou-no-Kata gave a cold, eerie laugh.

The shadow from the window frame stretched onto the bed.

"My Lady. There is something I would like to report to you."

"... What is it?"

"It seems that the Uesugi are on the move."

"What, the Uesugi?" Sanjou took in this information. "The [onryou](#) hunters of [Uesugi Kenshin](#) ? Those who are called the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) ? Was it not annihilated a short while ago—?"

"It seems that the remnants have reorganized themselves. Their goal is the eventual collapse of the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>>. They have proven to be much more troublesome than the inept [onshou](#) ."

"..."

"If Kenshin's **kanshousha** are on the move, then their purpose must be the <<**choubuku**>> of our Lord. If such a thing should occur, then there will be no way of

bringing him back." A suspicious light kindled in Kousaka's eyes. "What should we do?"

"We must destroy them."

"But they are **kanshousha** ."

Sanjou's eyebrows knit in displeasure. "We cannot stand by and watch our Lord be exorcised. Fear not; when the crucial moment cometh, thou wilt act as our rear-guard. Such is the duty of a vassal."

"..."

"We must first release our Lord. If we cannot break the spiritual vessel's <<internal bind>>, we cannot make any movements of our own. We must begin now."

"Yes, my Lady!"

Sanjou never noticed the sly grin that accompanied Kousaka's reply. She continued, "Also, there is one who concerns me."

Kousaka asked in return, "Who is it?"

"Upon taking possession of Yuiko and returning to this place, there was one who was with our Lord's spiritual vessel, Narita Yuzuru, when first

I encountered him. Furthermore, he came to see Yuiko yesterday. It would seem that he is a friend of Yuzuru, and was named 'Ougi Takaya' by the girl from earlier."

"Ougi Takaya?"

"I cannot understand it. Though he seems not to possess any great degree of spiritual power, somehow he was also able to see the flames...."

"Flames? Did something happen?"

"It was my mistake. That chit Yuiko seized an opportunity to oppose me when I saw our Lord for the first time in these four hundred years and allowed my emotions to run away from me. I suppressed her immediately but in truth it was my carelessness. Cursed girl...I did not expect her to carry that amount of <<power>>. I have underestimated her."

"But so too does it make her worthy of being thy spiritual vessel."

"Verily. No, 'tis that youngster called Ougi who concerneth me. There is something strange about him. I do not believe he is one of us, yet I do not know his nature. Nor can I discern his true shape. Only that he appears to be no ordinary human..."

Kousaka listened attentively with a cold serenity. (—Ougi Takaya...) He murmured the name in his mind.

Kousaka seemed to already know something of him, but had no intention

of informing Sanjou. On the contrary, it would appear that he had been relieved to ascertain that Sanjou knew nothing of Takaya's true nature. He had adopted an expressionless mask, pretending that it was the first time he had heard the name.

"I shall do as you ask, Lady, and keep watch over him."

"And what of our Lord?"

"I have given it much thought. I would like to ask my Lady's aid in this as well."

"My aid?"

"Yes, my Lady, with that girl from earlier, Saori." A small light gleamed in Kousaka's eyes. "She was with Narita Yuzuru this morning, so she is probably an acquaintance. As long as the spiritual vessel is so wary of strangers, we cannot easily approach him, but not so with those he already knows."

Sanjou immediately perceived Kousaka's intentions. "Thou art suggesting the use of that girl?"

"Exactly so. The suggestion from the bracelet will waver upon its removal, and our Lord's power will most likely overcome it such that he can break free of the spiritual vessel's <<spirit binding>>. ...My Lady."

Sanjou, having understood Kousaka's words, slowly smiled. "... I see."

Sanjou took a red carnation from the vase beside her pillow. "I will deal with

the girl. Thou wilt warn the other [onshou](#) . Those who lay a finger on Yuzuru...those who interfere...we shall destroy."

Kousaka lifted his eyes. Sanjou crushed the flower in her hand. "I shall leave it to thee."

"...Yes, my Lady!"

The wind emerged into the garden, into which the rays of the sun streaked red as blood.

At the same time, at sunset, two shadows walked shoulder to shoulder along the road following the bank of the river [Narai](#) on the western side of the city of [Matsumoto](#) .

"I'm sorry for dragging you out shopping with me."

The shadow who had so meekly apologized was Narita Yuzuru. Dressed casually in a Dhangarhi shirt, jeans, and white Prod-Keds, he was the image of a normal high school student.

"It's no bother at all."

The one who had so gently replied was the man who had given him the <<talisman bracelet>>, [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) .

Since there seemed to be those who wanted to remove the bracelet, he was acting as Yuzuru's bodyguard. Well, even if he had told Yuzuru not to worry about it, he really couldn't help but worry.

Yuzuru chuckled and said, "I see."

At around 2 that afternoon, Takaya had visited Yuzuru's house with the "mysterious man dressed in black", Naoe.

In the doorway facing the startled Yuzuru, Takaya had grimaced and reluctantly said, "Actually, um, this guy's my, er, cousin, [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) ...

"No way! Really? He's your cousin?"

Naoe greeted the astonished Yuzuru once more.

"I apologize for appearing so suddenly and startling you like that yesterday. It was urgent, so I'm afraid that Takaya did not have time to warn you."

Yuzuru alternated his stare between the two. "So Takaya was the one who called you...?"

Naoe seemed to secretly poke Takaya with his elbow. "Ow, that hurt!" Takaya complained in a whisper, but at Naoe's look grudgingly replied, "It looked like you were possessed by some kind of spirit, so I was worried, and um...went to...uh...[Tochigi](#) and...er...how'd it go again?"

Naoe buried his face in his hand for a moment. Apparently this was something they had rehearsed beforehand. He quickly followed up without

missing a beat: "Actually, my family has a temple of [Shingon-shu](#) in [Tochigi](#) . I am a licensed Buddhist priest, so thought that I might be of some help."

Takaya started. "What, you're a monk?"

"I told you that, did I not? Were you not paying attention?"

"You never told me! Then how come you don't shave your head?"

"I am not so particular about appearances."

"You gotta at least have a round head to be a monk!"

"That's up to the individual, I believe."

Yuzuru, listening to this conversation, was seriously taken aback. This was the first time he had heard of Takaya having a relative who was a monk.

Takaya went home shortly after. Since a shopping trip was next on the agenda, Naoe had accompanied Yuzuru as his escort.

Following the path that ran along the bank of the river, Yuzuru chuckled merrily.

"? ...What is it?"

"Hmm? ...it's nothing."

Catching himself, Yuzuru embarrassedly kicked at a pebble underfoot.

He'd been thinking about the exchange between Takaya and Naoe from earlier.

"Well, Takaya's really, you know, not very sociable, I guess. He's impertinent and bad-mannered and quick-tempered and rude, and he

quarrels with the teachers all year 'round..."

"?"

"He's always snapping at people who are older than him, and he never really lets his guard down with them. But he was joking around with you, right?"

"Was he joking around?"

"Yeah. Those barbs were his way of joking around. He's like a puppy—you can tell when he's just playing around because he doesn't bare his teeth."

Yuzuru turned his eyes to the flow of the river, where fragments of the setting sun glittered.

"When Takaya bares his teeth, even I get scared. He says stuff like 'screw you' and gets this bloodhound look in his eyes. But Takaya was just having fun earlier acting...well, like a spoiled child, I guess."

"Acting like a spoiled child?" Naoe looked at Yuzuru with true surprise in his eyes. "He was...with me?"

"Yes, he did." Yuzuru opened his eyes wide. "It's probably because I'm an only child, but I feel like my cousins are like distant siblings."

"..."

Yuzuru laughed, his gaze falling down to his feet. "Naoe-san, you're very like Takaya."

"...eh?..." Once again, an unexpected comment. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. Yesterday, after you left and Takaya came to visit, I thought, 'hmm, they're really alike, aren't they?' even though I had no idea you were cousins."

"Why do you think so?"

"Well, you're really different in terms of personality and appearance, but I guess you give off the same sort of vibes somehow..."

"..."

"Hmm? Speaking of which, you and Takaya don't look anything alike, do you?" Yuzuru tilted his head, but smiled. "But you still remind me of him. Even when I'm walking with you like this. Somehow it feels like I'm walking with Takaya..."

Looking at Yuzuru's innocent smile, Naoe was inwardly perplexed.

Needless to say, claiming that they were cousins was a big lie. They had decided to do so to prevent Yuzuru from having inconvenient doubts regarding Naoe. And yet Yuzuru thought that the two of them resembled each other.

They were alike. What meaning had the perceptive Yuzuru placed in these words?

(... This person...)

Perhaps Yuzuru had sensed that he was also a [kanshousha](#) .

Of course, he would not know the significance of their existence. However, even if he didn't recognize them, he could probably still sense them.

If that was what Yuzuru had meant by "alike", then he probably possessed genuine abilities of his own.

But if that was truly the case, then conversely it was also proof that he and Takaya were of the same kind.

(Can I believe that?)

These, his own intuitions.

Takaya's voice echoed in his ears: "What the hell are you talking about! Do you have any proof at all? If you're gonna say that I'm Kagetora, then prove it!"

Naoe's brow secretly drew together. (I'm probably uneasy as well—)

Until now, Naoe had thought that it would be impossible for him to mistake Kagetora. No matter the circumstances, he had no doubt that he would always be able to recognize Kagetora.

An unease because he'd had no leads on Kagetora, which he had thought would instantly disappear were he able to see Kagetora again. And yet even now it had not been obliterated. On the contrary, it had become all the stronger.

Was Takaya really Kagetora?

Did he have no choice but to await Takaya's "awakening"?

Naoe smiled slightly in self-derision. (I've become such a coward—)

Perhaps it was because they were up against such a formidable enemy this time.

But...

"Naoe-san?"

Yuzuru's voice recalled him to himself. Yuzuru was looking over at him.

"Yes?"

"You know, don't you?"

"About what?"

"About the spirit who's possessed me. About the 'him' inside of me, and—"

Naoe, enduring and returning Yuzuru's straight-forward gaze, stopped walking.

Yuzuru suddenly seemed to read something from Naoe's eyes

"I see..."

"..."

"That's true, isn't it?" Yuzuru smiled and said. "Since you're here with me, I'll be fine."

"Yuzuru-san."

"I'll be fine with you. I believe that."

(A mysterious young man...)

His earnestness, his sincere words gave peace to one's heart. Just having him near made one feel at ease.

He seemed a truly lovable young man.

And if he had not been mistaken in naming Takaya Kagetora...

That soul, exhausted and worn to the limits of endurance, probably had need of this young man.

Not himself...

...

Naoe addressed Yuzuru gently, "Please be there for him."

"?"

"I will watch over you, so...please watch over him."

Yuzuru looked over at Naoe curiously for a moment, but finally nodded and smiled a smile blurred by the setting sun.

"...I will."

A likeness of the Kagetora that he had so missed was painted against the sunset sky. But hardly had the contours been sketched before it disappeared into the noise of cars passing them from behind. Returning

once more to reality, Naoe suddenly came face to face with doubt.

To which Kagetora had that likeness belonged?

—there had been such pain within his eyes.

Chapter 6: Disaster

"What do

you mean, 'she went out'? Now wait just a minute here..." Takaya, standing in front of the examination room, yelled at the doctor who had just told him the news.

It was the next day, Sunday. Takaya had come to the hospital to visit Yuiko. The doctor replied placidly, "She may not have her memories, but she has a perfectly healthy body, so since she expressed a wish to go out, I allowed her to do so."

"You just let her—you shouldn't just let your patients do whatever they want!"

"Ah. Well, incidentally, she went with the young lady who accompanied you the other day when you came to ask her questions, so I asked her to look after the patient."

"Argh... Hey, Mister! Wait!"

The smiling doctor was already walking away down the corridor.

But "the young lady who came with you"? That would be...

(Morino?!)

Though he had *no* idea how she was a "young lady".

(What the hell? She took Yuiko out?)

Takaya pressed a hand against his face and groaned. When had they become so buddy-buddy? If Yuiko wasn't here, then he'd just wasted a trip.

"Damn Morino..." he groaned resentfully, but in the next moment sighed in resignation.

(...guess I'm going home?)

Actually, he hadn't gotten enough sleep last night, so his body was still sluggish. His circling thoughts had kept him awake all night. In his own way, he'd been affected.

By the words of the man who had called himself Naoe.

(He was probably just making fun of me, wasn't he?)

If so, it was a pretty elaborate story. But he didn't think that it was all a bunch of lies. Then again, he couldn't precisely believe everything the man had said.

But...

"Please keep an eye on her."

His words from yesterday were on Takaya's mind.

"..."

"Guess I'll have to go look for them."

And he tottered out the door.

The sky outside the building was overcast. Even the peaks of Northern Alps, which could usually be seen in the direction of the city, were barely visible. He hadn't taken his bike because he'd thought it might rain, and it looked like he'd been right. As he walked outside he heard the pitter-patter of the beginnings of a drizzle.

If Saori had taken Yuiko out, where would they be headed.....? It appeared that they'd decided to go sightseeing around [Matsumoto](#) .

(The castle, maybe...?)

That was probably a good bet. He started walking in that direction.

(...?)

He suddenly noticed the white gravel bed beneath his feet.

He saw in his mind the bike shed from yesterday. And Naoe, who had made the pebbles float into the air without touching them.

"Don't think that this does not concern you."

Takaya stared down at the pebbles.

He'd been half-convinced then, but—

(Can I do it...?)

If he really was Kagetora as Naoe had said, then he too should be able to use <<[nendouryoku](#) >>.

He concentrated his mind on a single pebble.

That image from yesterday.

(Come on...)

He glared at it with ferocious concentration, urging it upward in his mind. The rock clung stubbornly to the ground. Takaya concentrated all his power and focused on it once more.

(Move...!)

It didn't move one bit. To his vexation, it showed no reaction at all.

He grimly put all his power into it.

(Move, I said!)

The rock didn't even quiver.

As if it were ignoring Takaya on purpose.

Takaya exhaled and gave up.

As if it would move.

(Damn that lying monk!)

In an burst of pique he sent the pebble flying with a kick.

Naoe must've really just been playing with him.

(He'd better not think he can get away with it, because I'm gonna make him

pay.)

Having come to that ill-tempered conclusion, he brushed the hair out of his eyes and headed out of the hospital gates.

He'd definitely look foolish if he took that ridiculous story seriously.

The way to [Matsumoto Castle](#) was shorter via a back lane. His feet turned instinctively towards Nakamachi Avenue. Walking along lost in thought, Takaya hardly noticed the drizzling rain soaking into his clothes.

His feet stopped abruptly. Within the narrow spaces between buildings by the side of the street he suddenly saw strange shadows crossing the alleyways out of the corners of his eyes.

(...What...)

He turned to the right. There, too?

Behind him. Takaya turned slowly, and his eyes widened. He gulped hard.

An armored warrior walked behind him, heavy armor creaking with every movement. The warrior stared at Takaya out of hollowed eyes...no, they weren't eyes at all. What stood behind him was a skeleton. An armored skeleton.

Takaya couldn't find voice to speak.

(...It...)

Turning, he saw more skeletal warriors all around him—and these were

probably just the foot soldiers. The bones of their arms were yellow-tinged with the color of egg yolk, and they tottered around with the wisps of their few remaining hairs fluttering in the wind. At length they vanished in front of a storehouse. No, there was one left...

Takaya stood shock still, quietly staring.

And suddenly those almond-shaped eyes narrowed.

"The spirits linked to the Takeda are beginning to move."

Naoe's words.

(So I should believe him?)

Seeing what was happening now...

It was going to be hard to deny.

Meanwhile, Saori and Yuiko had finally arrived at the much-anticipated main stop of their [Matsumoto](#) sightseeing tour, [Matsumoto Castle](#) .

"Eek—wait up!" Saori gasped, short on breath as she climbed the very steep steps of the castle tower.

"Maybe I packed too much lunch? It's so heavy!"

Wheezing and panting, she finally arrived at the top of the stairs

almost on her hands and knees to find Yuiko, who had gone on ahead, waiting for her.

"..."

It was the highest floor of the tower. Though there were other pairs of tourists already there, it was still uncrowded because of the early hour. The well-lit top tower floor had latticed windows which were placed relatively near the ground. Saori, crouching to look out, said to Yuiko, "Oh, you can't see much because it's cloudy. If you come on a clear day, you can see a lot more."

"..."

Noticing that she was talking to herself, Saori peered at Yuiko's face. For some reason, Yuiko hadn't spoken to her since sometime earlier.

"Yuiko-chan, what's wrong? Are you feeling okay?"

"..."

Yuiko continued to stare outside expressionlessly. Though Saori thought Yuiko's manner rather strange, she pulled herself together and added, "You know, I really like this castle. There are other places that are this high up, but don't you think this place makes you feel special? Like, I wonder if princesses might have climbed up here or something. Maybe it's because I like historical dramas."

"..."

"Wouldn't it be great if this were your home? Oh, but in the winter it'd probably be cold," Saori said, and laughed at her own joke. Next to her, Yuiko murmured something in a faraway voice.

"...huh...?" Saori asked, not having catch what she'd said. Yuiko repeated huskily, "...This is our castle..."

"Yuiko-chan?"

In an expressionless tone that was almost a moan Yuiko muttered, "This [Fukashi Castle](#) belongeth to us, the Takeda, and to no other. It hath been sullied by false history."

The voice wrung from her throat gained in strength. "This castle belongs to the Takeda. This land is Takeda land."

"Eh, huh, what...???"

Saori was utterly confused and upset at being completely unable to interpret Yuiko's words. The other tourists had gone down the stairs, and only the two of them remained on this floor.

"Have...have you remembered something? Yuiko-chan..."



Yuiko's eyes became tinged with a suspicious light.

"This castle rightfully belongs to the Takeda. No other shall be allowed to touch it."

The edges of her lips curved in a cold smile. The person who stood there was obviously not Yuiko at all.

"Verily, we must purify this sullied castle. My Lord must take this country and steer history onto its rightful course."

Saori shuddered. This person who stood before her—

Who was she...!

"We shall be the ones to command the <<Yami-Sengoku >>!"

"!"

"All shall belong to my Lord!"

Purple light flared from Yuiko's open eyes, and Saori gasped.

She couldn't look away from that light! Her body wouldn't move!

"Thou art my servant. Thou wilt act as I bid thee."

The overwhelming power in her voice snatched away all thought. Those purple eyes controlled her heart. The voice took everything from Saori as she stood frozen and cut off from the rest of the world.

<<Break thou Narita Yuzuru's "spirit bind" and release our Lord.

Approach Yuzuru and remove the talisman bracelet from his wrist.>>

Saori stood unmoving. The voice wound tightly around her heart. It was an absolute decree that brooked no refusal.

<<Release Lord Shingen!>> Sanjou faced Saori and commanded, <<Now go!>>

The rain began to fall in earnest.

Matsumoto Castle , its tower covered in heavy lead-colored clouds, was soon soaked. Yuiko

stood unmoving in the drizzle and stared at the reflection of the castle on the surface of the moat's muddying water.

Takaya, who had finally arrived at the castle gardens, saw the young

woman standing there at the foot of the moat.

"—Yuiko-san."

Yuiko slowly turned, having already sensed his approach.

"Ougi-kun..."

"You're here by yourself? Where's Saori?"

"She said that she was feeling unwell and went home. But I don't know how to get back to the hospital, so...will you take me?"

Takaya nodded with a dubious expression on his face. "...Okay."

Yuiko quickly entwined her arms around Takaya's right. Takaya looked at her, taken aback, and Yuiko turned to him with a small voluptuous smile.

(...she...) Takaya thought with bewilderment.

Clinging to Takaya's arm, Yuiko turned around slightly with a bewitching smile hovering on her lips.

In the shade of a pine tree along the line of her gaze a shadow watched the two standing in the rain intently.

That shadow was the one who called himself [Kousaka Danjou](#) .

The next day.

Takaya, who had actually come to school today, met Yuzuru and Naoe at the school gates. Nothing at all had happened to Yuzuru yesterday, but he still looked pale. Though the suggestion of the talisman bracelet allowed Yuzuru to bind Shingen's spirit, it still probably required enormous force of will.

Unable to just stand by and watch, Takaya blurted out, "You should be home resting today."

"But...I've been resting way too much. And it'd be bad if I keep skipping Band."

"You've gotta stop being so serious about everything," Takaya half-scolled

Naoe, nearby, spoke up: "The exorcist I've called will arrive tomorrow. Please give it your best for one more day."

"You...!"

"Takaya!"

Yuzuru, holding Takaya back, tried to smile, but it came out strained on his tired, pallid face.

"It's okay. I'm fine, so don't worry about me. Naoe-san, may I leave myself in your hands?"

"Of course."

"Yuzuru!"

Yuzuru smiled.

"I'm fine. I have to talk to the teacher, so I'm going ahead. See you later," Yuzuru said, waving, but as he turned to go the tiredness fell once more over his face. He didn't look fine at all. Takaya, gazing after Yuzuru, sighed.

"That guy pushes himself way too hard."

"That's true, isn't it."

Takaya, leaning back against the parked Cefiro, brushed the hair out of his eyes.

"There's a question I've wanted to ask you for a while. How did you know that he was possessed?"

"... When a mother carries a fetus in her womb, you can hear the heartbeats of two people within one body. In the same way, you can sense the different tones of the soul energies belonging to two people."

"That's pretty handy. I have no idea what that would feel like, but if I were Kagetora, wouldn't I be able to tell too?"

"You probably have sharper senses than the likes of one such as I."

"...huh..."

The way Takaya nodded seemed to indicate that they were talking about someone else altogether.

"Then I can drive out the ghost who's possessed Yuzuru...too?"

"Takaya-san?"

"It's been two days. Where the hell is that friend of yours?"

Naoe's brows knitted slightly.

"Probably still out on business. We had planned for a quick return, but before the trip the [onryou](#) seemed to have become involved in a dispute, and it's probably taking a

little more time than we had expected to finish things up."

"What, there aren't any more of you?"

"Well, yes, but one is a baby right now, and the other is missing."

Takaya raised an eyebrow, annoyed.

"Can you guys really protect Yuzuru? Can you really drive out Shingen or what?"

"I will protect Yuzuru-san even if it costs my life."

Naoe was suddenly completely in earnest.

"I will absolutely not allow Shingen to have his way."

"..."

For a moment Takaya was swayed by the conviction in Naoe's voice.

But then he snorted a defiant laugh.

"Life? Your life?"

"?"

"You can just take over someone else's body when you die, so what does life matter to you?"

"!"

Naoe's eyes widened in shock.

(...what...?)

For a moment, Naoe's reaction gave Takaya pause. Though he had meant it

as a trivial sarcastic comment, Naoe glared at him with such terrible, dagger-edged ferocity that Takaya involuntarily recoiled. Naoe said coldly, "I never imagined that I would hear that from your lips."

"—"

"Those are exceedingly irresponsible words. Shall I not say the same back to you?"

Takaya scowled at him. Naoe returned glare for glare.

You, too, are [kanshousha](#) , was the implication in words unspoken.

"..."

Takaya was the one who broke away.

"I'm not Kagetora!"

"—Takaya-san..."

Takaya glared fixedly at the asphalt.

"... Just until tomorrow."

And he turned to look at the path behind him.

"Somehow it feels like someone's been watching me."

"!"

Naoe carefully extended his senses outward.

"Could it be someone named Kousaka?"

"I don't know his name, but...do you know him?"

Naoe sank for a moment into silence before replying, "Yuzuru-san mentioned yesterday that someone with that name had tried to take the talisman bracelet from him."

"Dangerous?"

"It would seem. I have a bad feeling."

Takaya looked up at the school building with narrowed eyes. "A bad feeling...huh?"

A shadow among the shadows of the school building fixed a look full of coldness upon the two.

Chapter 7: Resurrection

That the other side had made not a single move added all the more to the ominous atmosphere.

In addition, the identity of the spirit who had possessed Yuiko was also still unknown. Though there were no further signs of movement from the onryou , even that felt like the eerie calm before the storm. Yuzuru's <<spirit bind>> continued to weaken, and so it was inevitable that even a small shift in the balance would allow Shingen to break out of the <<spirit bind>>.

Classes had ended for the day.

Takaya watched over Yuzuru for a while at his club activities (a wind ensemble) before saying that he was worried about something and turned the bodyguard duties over to Naoe while he himself went to visit Yuiko at the hospital.

But the Takeda they were keeping such vigilance over had servants in places where they would never have thought to look.

The announcement for the end of school had sounded, and the students participating in club activities had mostly gone home.

Naoe waited for Yuzuru in the copse behind the deserted school. Perhaps because of the intense tension his expression too was strained with weariness. He glanced at his watch—almost seven. Probably about time for Yuzuru to be back.

(If it could just end quietly like this...)

He heard a rustle: the sound of a footstep on the grass behind him. He turned.

"...!"

His eyes widened.

At the base of a tree a little distance from him stood a young man wearing a trenchcoat—a beautiful young man with glossy jet-black hair and startlingly red lips in a pale, handsome face who was obviously not a student at the school. He stood with one hand against the trunk of the tree, looking over at Naoe attentively.

"It has been a while, [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) ," the youth called out his name in a clear voice like a flowing stream.

"..."

Naoe replied quietly, "So it is you. [Kousaka Danjou](#) ."

It would appear that they were somehow acquainted. A slight smile hovered at the corners of Kousaka's mouth as they stared at each other for a while in silence.

"I knew that you would show yourself, Naoe, and you have moved exactly as I'd expected."

Looking at Naoe gnash his teeth, Kousaka Danjou added, "So it seems that you've found Kagetora."

"!" Naoe was flabbergasted. "You knew...? You didn't...!"

"Unfortunately, you've overestimated me. I had no intentions at all of telling you the whereabouts of Kagetora. It was quite by accident that he was so close to the spiritual vessel we had chosen."

"__"

"I am quite impressed that he was able to return after being so grievously wounded in the fight against Oda thirty years ago. But still, it's no wonder that Kagetora has become like this, is it?"

"..." Naoe's brows knit. "It's a miracle that he was even able to perform kanshou after sustaining damage of that magnitude."

Kousaka calmly regarded Naoe. "...Hmm? Surely you do not blame Kagetora's amnesia on Oda's <<nakonha >>?"

"...!"

Naoe glared at him fiercely. Kousaka continued in a low voice, "It is not because of the blow from the <<nakonha >>

that Kagetora doesn't have his memories. It was he himself who wished for that. Kagetora sealed off the memories himself."

"...!..."

"It's not like you don't know. Who was it that kept driving him into the wall until he had nowhere left to turn? Who was it that forced him to seal himself away?"

"Shut up!"

"You were the one, Naoe!" Kousaka yelled. "You were the hypocrite who forced Kagetora into a corner when he was mortally wounded in both mind and body. You're not worthy to show him sympathy. What 'crush evil and spread the truth'? What 'righteous force'? You were originally just a lowly [onryou](#) !"

"!" Naoe inhaled sharply. His coat flapped in a breath of wind as he stood speechless, at a complete loss for a response.

Kousaka gazed intently at Naoe with cold eyes. "...humph," he snorted with derision. "It doesn't concern me in any case. I should thank you for the fact that Kagetora can't use his powers."

Naoe asked in a low voice, glaring at Kousaka, "Why did you release Shingen?"

"'Why'? What a foolish question. I too am a commander of armies. If this age takes on the aspect of the [Sengoku](#) once more, then it is the duty of the vassal to help his lord rule the world."

"—truly?" Naoe's eyes glittered at this glimpse of Kousaka's true feelings." Though I would never have imagined you to hold such foolish ambitions...."

"—"

Kousaka looked at Naoe without reply. After a moment submerged in thought, Kousaka said only, "Like you, I have no wish to see **Nobunaga** ruling 'all under heaven'".

"! ...Kousaka!"

Kousaka turned away abruptly and lifted his face to the sky. "Four hundred years ago, Lord **Takeda Shingen** died of illness while marching on the capital. This <<**Yami-Sengoku**>> can dispel the regrets of my Lord, whose life came to an end before he

could gain the rule of the country. I will give 'all under heaven' to Lord Shingen and no one else."

"So you would revive Shingen no matter what?" Naoe glowered at Kousaka. "The existence of the <<**Yami-Sengoku**>> threatens the order of this age. No matter that the reason, I cannot allow the resurrection of Shingen."

"Humph. So it is your intention to hinder us, Uesugi." A terrible bloodlust seeped into Kousaka's expression. "Naoe. I always thought that we would one day settle this, and it seems that day has come. We will destroy all those who stand in our way!"

With a *woosh* a violent flame-like aura erupted from Kousaka's body.

"Your <<**choubuku**>> has no effect on me, for I am one of the **kanshousha**! Fight me with your own powers, Naoe!"

Biting his lips sharply, Naoe concentrated his mind. An amber-colored aura rose from his body.

"I will show you no mercy, Kousaka Danjou ."

A terrible force warped the space between them.

Kousaka yelled, "I will destroy you, Naoe!"

Yuzuru was still in the Year 2 Group 3 classroom. It was after his club activities, and he was finally leaving around the time his classmates had already all gone home.

It was probably because he'd put too much time into tidying up that he was so late. The corridors were already deserted.

Sighing tiredly, Yuzuru went up to his desk to retrieve his bag.

(Can I make it home...?)

If he could have, he would have sunk to the floor right where he stood.

But then, he probably wouldn't have been able to get up again.

Yuzuru stared out the window in a daze.

(I'll ask Naoe-san to take me home in his car,) Yuzuru thought, and clutched his bag as he staggered towards the classroom door. Then—

"?"

Noticing the presence of another person in the entrance, Yuzuru lifted his head. There was still someone here.

The one standing there was—strangely, it was Morino Saori.

Yuzuru's eyes widened.

"Morino-san."

Saori didn't respond. She only looked over at him blankly. Speaking of which, he hadn't heard her voice all day. Usually energetic to the point of disruption, she had been strangely demure today. And the Saori who stood there now also seemed far from her usual self.

(Maybe she isn't feeling well?), he thought, and forgetting about his own fatigue, walked up to her.

"You're still here? Morino-san."

Saori looked up at Yuzuru silently.

Yuzuru was not on guard at all. He asked, concerned, "You look pale. Are you feeling unwell?"

Saori hanged her head. To Yuzuru she looked quite ill.

"If you're feeling unwell, then you should hurry home and rest. Should we call your house? If you like, I can ask for a car—" he started to say, when suddenly—

Morino collapsed into Yuzuru's arms.

"Morino-san!" Yuzuru shouted, holding onto Saori confusedly. Saori crumbled slowly to the ground in Yuzuru's arms.

"Hey! Morino-san! Hold on!"

Propped up in Yuzuru's embrace, Saori buried her face against Yuzuru's shoulder. His left arm.

His left wrist.

"Morino-san! Are you okay? Hold on!"

The fingers of Saori's right hand softly crawled up Yuzuru's left wrist. Yuzuru never noticed. She touched the bracelet.

Held within Yuzuru's arms, Saori's eyes glinted slightly.

"!"

On the streets, Takaya suddenly looked back over his shoulder.

He'd been on his way to Yuiko's hospital when he'd felt that vague premonition. He unconsciously came to a halt, suddenly assaulted with the sensation of something tingling through his heart.

(What was that just now...?)

An uneasiness he'd had from earlier. Even more intense than what he'd felt with Yuiko.

What had happened?

His gaze sharpening on his path, Takaya turned once more toward the hospital and began to run.

Tremendous concussive denotations boomed overhead and broke off the branches of a ginkgo tree one after another.

"!"

Naoe looked up reflexively and glared sharply. In a moment the falling branches caught fire and were reduced to ashes that poured down like rain.

The ground began to shake vigorously.

"What...!"

The ground beneath Kousaka's feet gave a rumbling roar, and in the next moment caved in!

"!"

Kousaka jumped away, avoiding the spot by a hair's breath. Naoe released his will once more, aiming at Kousaka's landing spot.

Collapse. Kousaka continued to jump back. Time and again the ground beneath his feet caved in. Kousaka kicked off lightly and landed beneath the school's emergency stairs.

"You...!" His ferocious eyes went wide. Just at that moment—

"Ugh...!"

A jarring sound came from Naoe's body as Kousaka's attacking [nenpa](#) enveloped him with a pressure field almost enough to pulverize his bones.

"Aaaargh!"

Naoe's resisting will crushed the window frames of the classroom behind him, cracking the glass.

"!"

Then with a terrible sound the glass shattered.

Having cut off Kousaka's attack, Naoe focused his <<power>> and went on the offensive once more. Kousaka was ready for him.

The two forces exploded with a thundering crash against each other, flaring like lightning and sending sparks leaping off into the air.

Both of them were hurled back. Naoe collided against a wall of the school building, and Kousaka was hurtled down to the ground. Clutching at the branch of a tree, Kousaka finally managed to half-raise himself, panting in short gasps, and laughed deep in his throat.

"Heheh. No ordinary power, as expected."



Enduring the pain shooting down his back, Naoe returned the glare.

"Naoe. Would you like to hear why I choose Narita Yuzuru as the spiritual vessel?"

"?"

"His true nature. It seems that none of you have noticed it yet."

"What!" Naoe raised his voice. "What do you mean! Kousaka!"

"It's truly laughable that you haven't realized it. But—"

"?"

"It's probably some sort of fate that Kagetora was there beside him."

Naoe's expression suddenly changed.

"Kousaka, damn you. What do you know...?!"

"Narita Yuzuru's existence is a threat to the Roku Dou Sekai .

It is necessary that he be destroyed. —Hmm. Well, in any case, his <<powers>> will be used to gain total control of the <<Yami-Sengoku >> When that happens, he will be erased, and his body will become the shukutai for my Lord's kanshou ."

Kousaka suddenly shouted in a ringing voice, "Our master Lord Takeda Shingen has been resurrected! Unite in this place, beneath the flag of the Huurinkazan !"

Naoe spun, startled. No...!

(Yuzuru-san!)

The door of the hospital room slammed open, and Ougi Takaya leapt inside. Takaya looked around the room, chest heaving with his exertions.

Yuiko was standing by the window, gazing over at him. "Welcome, Ougi Takaya."

"You..." a nameless ire made Takaya snap. His hands clenched into fists, and he yelled, "What the hell are you? What the hell are you guys up to?"

Yuiko smiled beguilingly. "Before I tell thee, wilt thou not show me thy true shape?"

"What did you say?!"

"Dost thou aim to save Yuzuru? Then thou art already too late."

"What! You...!" he retorted, when a sharp pain shot through his forehead. Within the white sparks crackling his head apart—

A split-second image.

(! ...Yuzuru!)

Yuiko laughed loudly and raised her voice in triumph: "I am Sanjou!

This is the resurrection of our Lord! None shall stop us now!"

Returning to himself, Takaya's eyes widened.

Yuiko's feet lightly touched off the floor, and she floated upward.

Sanjou looked down at Takaya from mid-air. "Thou canst no longer stop us. No one shall stop us. Now watch our resurrection!"

"I"

A sudden wind blew into the room and violently slammed the window open.

Sanjou flew outside and yelled at Takaya, who had shielded his body against the violent gust: "Fool...!"

White images shredded his vision apart.

The bracelet glowed on Yuzuru's wrist.

Saori's lips curved into a smile.

The bracelet, unclasped from Yuzuru's wrist, burned with an intense

flash of light before it hit the ground with a silvery chink.

Yuzuru's eyes widened.

With a terrible *crack*, fissures ran through windows all over the school. The florescent lights upon the ceiling exploded one after another and snapped off their settings. The floor beneath their feet began to tremble ominously, and soon the entire school began to shake with a deep rumbling sound.

The floor dipped, while at the same time the desks within the classroom rose up into the air. Light exploded into the classroom, invading the darkness.

White—everywhere.

Rising from Yuzuru's cowering body to the heavens.

A streak of dazzling light shot up like an arrow into the night.

Takaya, turning.

Naoe, breath catching.

Kousaka, eyes widening.

Shingen had been released!

"Yuzuru!"

Even the shout that burst from Takaya with all his might could not reach Yuzuru.

The white light enveloped the entire building.

Sanjou's voice raised in delight split the sky. <<He hath been resurrected. He hath been resurrected. This night we celebrate, o our warriors of old. Tonight we exult in the resurrection of our Lord [Takeda Shingen](#) . Let us celebrate the resurrection!>>

"Morino...!"

Back the school, Takaya discovered Morino collapsed at the entrance to the classroom.

"Morino! Hey, Morino!"

When he lifted Saori, a silver bracelet slipped from her hand to roll down with a clink to the floor.

"...!"

Seeing it, Takaya's breath caught in his throat. So the bracelet had been removed after all. By Saori's hand.

Yuzuru was nowhere to be seen.

"...uh...nn..."

Saori seemed to wake. Her eyes snapped open, and she suddenly started

"Oh no! Ougi-kun?"

"Morino. Where's Yuzuru?"

"Huh? What? What's wrong with Narita-kun?"

It would seem that she remembered nothing. Takaya bit his lips.

(Was she being controlled by someone?)

"Will you be okay, Morino? Can you get home by yourself?"

"Huh, what? What do you mean? What have I been doing?"

"I'll tell you later. Go home for now."

"What? Wait...! Ougi-kun!"

Outside the classroom Takaya started running. The sun had set a long time ago, and it was completely dark outside. Naoe was nowhere in sight. If Yuzuru's body had been taken over by the unbound Shingen...

(Where did the hell did he go?)

Takaya flew out of the school and continued at a dead run towards the night streets.

Thunder pealed from the distant sky.

An ominous rumbling assaulted the streets from out of nowhere. Black

clouds filled the night sky. A flash of lightning tore the darkness of the sky apart. The wind strengthened. The publicity flag of an arcade along the road whipped around in the wind, signposts crashed to the ground, and trees tossed their branches about in a frenzy.

The site of [Matsumoto Castle](#) .

In the deserted garden, spotlights illuminated the silent towers brightly for a moment and floated towards the inner moat.

Deserted...

But no, there were two shadows: two shadows standing motionlessly at the head of the moat, looking up at the castle tower.

They were Narita Yuzuru and Yuiko.

"My Lord..." Yuiko said to Yuzuru. "That is our [Fukashi Castle](#) ."

"Indeed..." Nodding slightly, Yuzuru continued to look up at the tower.

"This is our Fukashi Castle. Yet it is unfit for our triumphant return. It hath been disgraced by false history." He continued with quiet dignity, "We must cleanse this castle of its sullied history. We must cleanse the enmities and passions of those who lived within <<vicious history>>. Then we the Takeda will once again become its master."

"—Yes."

A thin smile hovered on her cold [Noh mask](#) -like expression. "I will cleanse

this castle."

"Mmm." Yuzuru's gaze glided across the spotlights mounted on the side of the moat. A split-second of power from those eyes.

The lights went out, accompanied by the sharp crack of breaking glass.

Matsumoto Castle sank into darkness.

Then Yuzuru cast his gaze around them. In the next instant, all the electric lights within the garden were extinguished with popping noises one after another like falling dominos. Smiling approval of the darkness that now covered the garden, Yuiko quickly moved towards the castle and extended her right hand.

The black castle tower submerged in darkness.

Yuiko's eyes opened wide with a snap. Then.

Woosh!

With a sound like fire spouting from a burner, purple flames enveloped the castle tower!

"Ahhh...!"

The tower went up in flames with a roar. The pure wooden tower of the castle, which from its construction had never known the touch of fire, was now engulfed by purple flame.

"Heh..." Yuzuru laughed loudly, his glittering eyes illuminated by the fierce flames.

"Heheheh...! Hahahah! Burn! Burn hotter! Celebrate my resurrection!
Burn in celebration! Burn the remains of this sullied history to ashes!"

Nearby, a thin, eerie smile hovered on Yuiko's face. Yuzuru—no,
Shingen—boasted loudly, "We shall purify this city! We shall destroy it
all! This age created after we failed to rule the world is all a sham.
Toyotomi and Tokugawa are both fakes! The history of this world is sullied
history! Those born from that history we shall destroy!"

A wind rose from the heat of the fire. Looking at the burning castle,
Shingen yelled above the roar of the flames, "Destroy it! Burn to
ashes! Destroy it all!"

Chapter 8: Feast of the Nue

The shrill screech of tires tore apart the darkness of the night.

The driver of the red Silvia which had come to such a sudden stop, a youth with the appearance of a college student, looked like he was about to faint dead away from shock.

"What are you doing?" the young woman in the passenger's seat demanded

heatedly. The young man's hands clutched around the steering wheel began to shake.

"I...I hit someone...!"

"What!" The woman started and looked around. "No...no way! That's impossible! There's no one in sight!"

"He jumped out right in front of me! I couldn't stop in time, so I must've hit him!"

"No way! Go check! Hurry up and check!"

The flustered youth climbed out of the car. At the same time he heard a blood-curdling shriek.

"Wh—what?"

It had come from the woman in the car. The vehicle had begun to convulse

"Wh-what's happening? Is it an earthquake?"

The car shook violently—no, something was shaking the car! The woman looked out of the window.

"Kyaaaaaaaaah!"

There were a number of skulls pressed against the car window—skeletal warriors in rotting armor were shaking the car!

"Eeeeeeeek! No—!"

A battle line of the spirits of dead warriors advanced on the car surrounded by skeletons. The skeletons climbed all over the windshield, blocking the view. The car creaked, and the backseat window was shattered. The woman shrieked, "Some-someone help me—!"

Meanwhile, strange things were happening on the streets of [Matsumoto](#) . Windows of buildings suddenly shattered, electric lines snapped, cars ran out of control, all without discernable cause; this phenomenon spread steadily all across [Matsumoto](#) .

"Gyaaaaaaah!"

The scream came suddenly from the throng on the main street in front of the station .

Pedestrians scattered. A man dressed like the employee of some company

tumbled into sight. Slashed diagonally across his shoulder was a long,

terrible wound. Covered in blood and shivering uncontrollably, he held out a hand towards passersby.

"P-please help me..."

Fresh blood spread rapidly across the asphalt. Nearby pedestrians blanched as they stood staring blankly at the sight.

"Hey! Some-someone, call an ambulance! Help... Eeeek!" one person bending down to help the man shrieked. Behind the prone man an armored

skeleton holding a sword dripping with blood came into sight.

"Waaaah!"

"Get away from me!"

People scattered in all directions. From the opposite side of the street came the sound of shattering glass. A group of skeletal warriors had massed against a store window display and smashed it to pieces.

Skeletal warriors suddenly appeared everywhere and began to attack the pedestrians. Mercury streetlamps flickered like crazy, and traffic lights blinked on and off like neon lights in complete disorder. Cars ran every which way, and accidents broke out here and there in the chaos.

Kousaka, watching the panic ensuing from the rioting of the violent poltergeists and skeletal warriors from the shadow of a building, murmured, "—So it's begun."

After Shingen's release Kousaka had retreated from Naoe's <<nenpa >>. Naoe had chased after him at once, but he would now probably make stopping Shingen his first priority; there was no sign of Naoe coming after him.

However, it seemed that for whatever reason Kousaka had no intentions of aiding Shingen and Sanjou with his power.

(I'll give you a chance, Naoe,) Kousaka thought. (If you wish to awaken Kagetora, there is no opportunity more perfect than this.)

He had decided to assume the role of a spectator in this particular play.

"Lord Shingen. Please show me the power of the Koushuu onryou ."

His coat flapped as an eerie full red moon rose over his right shoulder.

—Borne by the voice of the nue
Are terror and dread;
Oh, terror and dread.

(That bastard! Where the hell did he go?)

Takaya had practically flown out of the school and was now running around the Matsumoto streets seeking Yuzuru. He knew that Shingen had broken out of Yuzuru's

<<internal bind>> and had been resurrected, but had found

no trace of him at all. A blast of sirens from an ambulance flashing across the street caught Takaya's attention, and he turned.

(A fire-engine and an ambulance?)

The entire city was clamoring with noise; there was a fire somewhere, and just now a ambulance had passed him with sirens wailing towards [Matsumoto Castle](#) . He'd heard something like a car accident earlier, and there seemed to be more patrol car sirens going off than usual as well.

"Feh," Takaya scowled. (Damn it all, what the hell is happening?)

Takaya turned as he caught the strange sound of a loud, rhythmic banging sound as of something being struck repeatedly.

He started.

(Ack...!)

A number of skeletal foot soldiers were hacking repeatedly at the storefront of the diner behind him with what looked like hammers or hatchets. Their objective was apparently the food inside. A few who had succeeding in breaking into the vending machine to one side were guzzling beer from crushed cans.

(You've gotta be kidding me!)

His gaze returned to the street, where he saw a swarm of warriors loudly trashing a station wagon to pieces.

It was so much worse than he'd thought that he was stunned into complete speechlessness.

(This is what he meant by "they're starting to move quite vigorously"...?!)

Then he suddenly heard a woman's piercing scream from behind.

"!"

He turned.

(What was that...?)

It'd come from that alleyway. Takaya turn on his heel towards the source of that scream and began to run.

"What do you want? No, stay away! Don't come near me!" Saori yelled shrilly, cornered by skeletal warriors at a dead end in the alleyway.

"I wouldn't taste good at all if you ate me! I'm fashionably thin, so there's nothing of me to eat!"

The skeletal warriors slowly approached. Pressing against the wall at her back, Saori yelled, "Someone help me!"

There...

"! ...Morino!"

She opened her eyes at the sound of her name.

"Ougi-kun!"

Whack!

Takaya kicked at the skeletal warriors from behind and rushed over to Saori.

"What're you doing here? Didn't I tell you go to home?"

"But— But—!"

"What!"

"Something's happened to Narita-kun, right? You acted so strangely, so of course I was worried! It's all your fault!"

"You-you idiot!"

They turned as a prickling feeling of menace crept upon them from behind.

The skeletal warriors had drawn their swords and were coming in their direction.

(Eeek, no way!)

The skeletons screamed without sound and attacked with swords held over their heads.

The long swords sliced down with a whistling sound.

"Waaaah, look out!"

"Gyaaah!"

Takaya pushed Saori down, dodging the naked sword, and both of them hit the ground.

(—!...)

(Bastards! They're just fucking *ghosts*!)

"Aaah!" Saori screamed shrilly.

"What!"

"Up close you're kinda a hunk."

"Don't make me smack you!"

"Ougi-kun! Behind you, look out!"

He turned. The warriors were standing in front of them with naked swords positioned once more, obviously filled with bloodlust.

"The-they look like they mean business."

"Eww! Fight them, Ougi-kun!"

"Hey, stop using me as a shield!"

"Bu-but you're a guy! Go! Go!"

"Morino, dammit!"

The warriors' swords sliced towards them.

"!"

They couldn't escape!

The sword came roaring down from overhead. Takaya's eyes squeezed tightly shut.

(It's no good...!) he thought with resignation.

"bai!"

The warrior in front of them disappeared with a wail.

(—huh?)



He raised his eyes towards the street to see the dust-covered figure of a man dressed in a black suit standing at the corner of a concrete wall. Takaya shouted, "Naoe!"

"Why are you playing around in a place like this? Have you forgotten that there are lives at stake?"

"Does it look like we're playing around?!"

The remaining warriors turned sharply towards Naoe, and Naoe's eyes narrowed to dagger-glints. The warriors suddenly attacked with blood-curdling howls.

"bai!"

The air twisted with a swish of sound, and all the warriors suddenly disappeared.

Takaya and Saori looked on in mute astonishment.

Naoe had been chasing after Shingen, but appeared to have been dragged into dealing with the hordes of ghosts. Naoe impatiently said, "Please give me a hand instead of standing there like a rock. If we don't exorcise all of the resurrected dead..."

"Wh-what do you mean, give you a hand...? You—!"

"Wow, that's so cool..." Saori murmured from behind. Takaya rolled his eyes.

"Wha?"

"I really really like these kinds of things, you know! I know all about them! They're called 'psychic horrors', right? Teach me too!"

"Sheesh, you know—!"

"Takaya-san," Naoe interrupted forcefully, "Shingen has erected a barrier of considerable size over the center of [Matsumoto City](#) .

Within the barrier the ghosts' <<powers>>—and of course

Shingen's own—are amplified. However, ordinary people are now able to

see them and their actions."

"—What're they planning?"

"Probably the complete destruction and subjugation of [Matsumoto](#) . Everything in today's world is a target for their malice. They wish to not only destroy [Matsumoto](#) , but use it as their stronghold in the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>> war.

Takaya's expression turned grim. "Destroy the city? Shingen's not Godzilla or anything—can he really do that?"

"He can do it." Naoe's eyes glinted sharply. "To the [onryou](#) , the power of 'destruction' is everything. Their malice is completely transformed into 'destruction'. With the amplification of their spiritual powers they appear to have gained half-material bodies, but since they were originally spirits, no modern weapons will harm them. We have no choice but to stop them ourselves."

"Yuzuru—" Takaya asked angrily, "What the hell happened to Yuzuru?"

"__"

"You said that you'd protect him! Is Yuzuru dead? Has Shingen already stolen his body?"

"Shingen has not yet performed [kanshou](#) ."

"How the hell do you know?"

Naoe glared at him sharply.

"You're completely irresponsible! What the hell are you going to stop

anyway, when you couldn't even protect Yuzuru? You bastard! Yuzuru might die, and you're talking about responsibilities? Don't make me laugh!"

A pulse throbbed at Naoe's temples. "Irresponsible? I've put my life on the line to protect him."

"If you couldn't protect Yuzuru, then it's all the same anyway."

"Then let me ask in return," Naoe flared. "You, whom I have told are the only one who can save Yuzuru-san, why have you not admitted to your powers? Why have you not acted at all?"

Takaya was at a total loss for words.

"Do not blame everything on someone else when you should be taking action yourself. You possess the <<power>>. You and you alone can save Yuzuru-san from Shingen's <<kanshou >>."

"—"

"Those who have the power to act and yet do nothing are cowards. Am I wrong?"

"I'm not Kagetora...!"

"Please stop this irresponsible behavior!" Naoe rebuked him mercilessly. "You keep running and running—are you so afraid of bearing responsibility? Are you so afraid of knowing the truth?"

"—Naoe..."

"There is nothing I can do if you don't want to admit it. But you don't actually know whether or not you are Kagetora, do you? So why don't you try believing, even if you think you're deceiving yourself? Please just try believing that you are the Uesugi Kagetora I speak of."

"..."

Naoe pressed the speechless Takaya, "If you do, you'll probably be able to use some of Kagetora-sama's powers even if you're just an ordinary human being."

"... What the hell kinda trick is that?"

"Well. Is that what it sounds like?" Naoe turned away, not wanting Takaya to read his feelings at that moment. "In any case, please search in the vicinity of Matsumoto Castle . It is a perfect base which Shingen can use to gain control of Matsumoto ."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to look around the station . The matter of Kousaka concerns me."

"Who the hell is Kousaka?"

"A kanshousha of the Takeda. One of those responsible for the revival of Shingen."

"No way! Then he's like you?"

"Yes. Though he looks somewhat strange."

"'Strange'...?"

Naoe's brows drew together silently. During the fight earlier, Kousaka, rather than running away, seemed to have let him go. His actions were contradictory; was he really hostile?

And then there were those enigmatic words...

"In any case, please go now. You can do an imitation <<choubuku >>, yes? I wish you luck."

"Ah—hey! Wait!"

But Naoe was already running towards the alleyway. Behind him, Saori cried, "Who was that? Someone you know? What's wrong with Narita-kun?"

Did you say that he died? What—"

"I'm not gonna let him die!" Takaya shouted half-despairingly. "I don't know anything, but I'll go, okay? It pisses me off that a guy like that would try to preach to me!"

"Ougi-kun, can you do things like that?"

"I don't know anything about 'choubuku' or 'tonpuku' ^[1] or whatever it is, but the point is to beat the crap out of them, right? Fine, bring it on!"

"Waaaah, Ougi-kun!"

Saori chased confusedly after the shouting Takaya as he sprinted away.

The fire wouldn't go out!

A cluster of fire trucks had hurried over to [Matsumoto Castle](#) , and the front of the castle was an awful chaotic mess. The fire

fighters, despite vigorous action, were making no headway against the fire at all.

The castle continued to blaze. The dumbfounded fire brigade stared up at the fire hopelessly.

"Is it..." one firefighter muttered. "Is it really burning?"

It felt as if they were pouring water on an illusion. The proof was that the castle was not crumbling away at all. It stood there just as solidly as before.

A human figure moved on the highest floor of the castle tower: a young woman with long black hair dressed in a sailor uniform. Yuiko...no, Sanjou, who had possessed Yuiko, looked down on the fire trucks and throngs of people on the other side of the moat. She muttered to herself, "Hmph. So the rabble hath been roused."

She glanced fleetingly towards the south. Smoke was rising here and there, and she could hear the voices of panicked people even from where she stood.

Sanjou laughed.

"My Lord's <<power>> alone is enough to devastate this city

to such an extent—'tis child's play. Just a little while more, my Lord."

Sanjou looked down on the scene below: fire engines sitting in a row, firefighters running around. Sanjou's eyes glowed purple.

Boom!

One fire truck exploded with flames. Screams rose from beneath.

Sanjou's gaze roamed avariciously. And then, as if her eyes were laser beams, the copse of pine tree near the castle began to blaze in obedience to her command.

Sanjou laughed uproariously.

"Hey you! This place is dangerous, so stay back!" A police officer warned the uniformed youth. It was a broadcasting office near the center of the city. Just a little while ago the broadcasting dish on top of the building had taken a hit from what had looked like a bolt of lightning and had been completely destroyed. A flurry of policemen and first-aid personnel rushed around the roped-off perimeter of the broadcasting building in terribly noisy confusion.

The broadcasting dish collapsed, destroying the rooftop of a nearby building before falling to the ground, scattering debris in a wide radius.

The youth turned.

"—"

Fire sparks from the blaze flickered underfoot. Fire-bright chestnut hair stirring in the wind, the young man gazed at the officer who had cautioned him.

"This area is dangerous, so go back home. Don't go any closer!"

Yuzuru muttered in a low voice, "... Thou wilt command *me*?"

"What did you say? Hey you!"

"Small fry."

Yuzuru's eyes flared.

"Waaaah!"

The officer, tossed back close to three meters by an unseen hand, hit the ground and stretched out unconscious on the asphalt. Yuzuru smiled thinly before returning his gaze to the road.

The cars parked there exploded one by one.

Pieces of glass from the shattered windows of surrounding buildings fell in a glittering rain among the myriad fires blazing everywhere, twinkling amidst screams and cries of anger. Panicked people ran around wildly in an effort to escape.

"Run! Run away! And obey me!"

Yuzuru began to laugh exultantly. Yuzuru...no, Shingen began to walk down the smoke-shrouded street, his wide eyes triumphant, illuminated

by columns of crimson flame.

"Damn. What a mess."

A truck on its side lay across the center of the road. Its cargo had unraveled, and construction materials were scattered everywhere. Its surroundings were in comparably bad condition. An automobile had plunged into the guardrail. An arcade building's pillar had folded, and its roof had fallen in. It was completely untraversable.

"What the hell happened here?"

Takaya blinked at the pedestrian-only Main Street. Saori ran up behind him

"I said to wait up! You should know that you have longer legs than I do!"

"Shut up! It's not like I asked you to come."

"So you were just going to leave a girl in a place like that all by herself?"

"Feh."

Takaya stopped Saori's rant short and indicated the road ahead slightly.

"Huh?" she asked in a small voice, then gasped.

There on the street, at the [Sensai Bridge](#) crossing on the road continuing into [Matsumoto Castle](#), was a mass of skeletal warriors. That [Sensai Bridge](#) had once been the way to the front gates of the castle. It looked as if

the warriors had been placed there as gate-watchers to protect the

castle against attack. So if that was true, then perhaps Shingen was inside!

"...dammit. Fucking bastards."

Takaya picked up an iron pipe lying at his feet. It had rolled off the truck. He picked up another and tossed it to Saori.

"Here."

"What?" Saori caught the pipe and blinked. "What is this? What's it for?"

"We can't go up against them bare-handed. We're gonna clobber those skeletons and rush through."

"No way—!" Saori belted out. "You're going to make me do something like that?"

"It's not like we have a choice."

"But I'm a girl!"

"I couldn't tell."

"Wh-what did you just say?!"

Takaya quickly covered Saori's mouth to quiet her down, and Saori wriggled in protest. Checking on the situation from the shadows of the truck, Takaya tightened his grip on the iron pipe.

"It's for Yuzuru's sake. Think of it as rescuing your prince and gimme a hand."

"Huh? No way! I'm going to rescue Narita-kun?"

"On the count of three. Don't stop until you're past them."

"Right, right. Oh, I'm so happy!"

"... Just act like your usual self."

The count began. One...

Saori waited in breathless tension. Two...

"Three!"

Takaya leapt onto the street. At the same time, Saori flew out like a shot. The skeletons turned towards them.

"Get outta my way—!"

Whack whack!

Takaya mowed down the skeletons in his path with abandon, aiming for their midsections with the iron pipe in his hands. The warriors collapsed with a dry rustle of bones. Some had drawn their swords. Wielding the iron pipe, Takaya clobbered the next warrior and the next.

"Narita-kun! Yiiiiiiiiiiiiiaaaa!"

Saori launched into the fray with an earth-shattering yell. Takaya's face twitched as he watched Saori get down to some serious violence.

(She's an Amazon!)

...It was rather scary.

The two, aiming for the skeletons' heads, smashed their way through the crowd of warriors in a wink.

Or so it seemed.

The skeletons reassembled themselves from the places where they had fallen like a video in reverse and creakingly stood once more. Takaya shouted, "Yeargh! They're zombies!"

They launched into another attack.

"Why the hell—?!"

So this is what he'd meant by modern weapons having no effect?

He was forced to start swinging the iron pipe once more, but there was no end to the fight! Finally even Saori started crying.

"We can't go on like this! Ougi-kun!"

"I know! Dammit!"

Skeletons attacked Saori from behind. Takaya spun towards her.

"! Morino!"

And then suddenly something flashed from Saori's body.

"Kyaaaa!"

"Morino!"

The warriors surrounding her were all sent flying simultaneously. They moaned in pain where they had landed on the ground.

"???"

Saori herself was also dumbfounded. Takaya's jaw dropped as he looked at her.

"Morino? You...???"

"I-I don't know! I have no idea what happened just now!"

With sudden intuition, Takaya looked at Saori's blazer pocket.

"What do you have in there?"

"Huh? Er—"

She took it out. What Saori was carrying was the <<talisman bracelet>> that had been on Yuzuru's wrist earlier.

"Na-Narita-kun dropped it earlier. I think he had it on the other day.

I was going to return it to him. I wasn't up to anything, so don't jump to conclusions!"

(Was it because of this thing...?)

Ah, so it seemed that it was a power that the ghosts could not approach. Takaya smiled.

"Lucky break. Let's go, Morino. Don't take that thing off your wrist."

"Huh? Is it okay? Really? For me to wear this? I can really put it on?"

"Ah, geez. Just put it on already!"

The warriors were rising. In front of them there was another crowd of skeletal warriors. Saori put the bracelet on her wrist.

"I'm all set, Ougi-kun."

"All right. Let's take the stage."

Takaya yelled towards the warriors, "Ready or not, here we come!"

Liking raging billows they rushed forward together.

"!" Yuiko turned. An approaching 'aura'.

(Ougi Takaya, so thou hast come—)

Sanjou-no-Kata laughed with a feeling of invincibility.

"I see. Very well. So it seems that I, Sanjou, shall greet thee in person."

Casting her glance down from the castle tower, Sanjou-no-Kata 's aura quietly began to glow. A bewitching radiance shone from her eyes.

Flames rose here and there within the city.

Passing out of the rubble of a collapsed building, Naoe finally reached a

main road.

(Where are Shingen and the others...?)

His clothes were covered in dust, and in places were torn and stained with blood. He had already finished off hundreds of the resurrected dead of the Takeda. But of course performing <<choubuku >> that many times by himself demanded an enormous amount of stamina.

(Can I really take Shingen on in this state?)

He arrived at the terminal in front of Matsumoto Station .

Then...!

"!"

He saw a sea of flames spread before his eyes.

A taxi as well as some other parked cars had been completely enveloped by the fire and continued to burn with loud rumbles. It seemed that everyone had taken shelter; there was no sign of life. It was like the ghost-town aftermath of a terrorist attack. The station building, too, looked like it had been hit by bombs; its windows were smashed, and the building itself was half-collapsed.

"__"

Naoe's breath caught in his throat once more. —Was this something he had the power to stop by himself?

He realized for the first time that he was shivering.

He turned at the sound of movement.



He saw a human shape in the direction of the flames. Was it Kousaka? he was wondering, when the figure stepped into sight—

"! ...Yuzuru-san!"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth he remembered: no—

(Shingen!)

The other man had also noticed him. Recognizing Naoe, Yuzuru walked across the fire toward him.

"Hoh. So, 'tis thee. The one who gave my vessel the suggestion to bind me."

His voice was so low that one could not imagine it to belong to Yuzuru.

Naoe went on the alert once more and began to gather his
<<power>>.

"Thou art Naoe Nobutsuna —the son of Kenshin's trusted retainer, Naoe Yamato-no-Kami . I perhaps met thee once at Kawanakajima ...so thou wert kanshousha . We should first celebrate our reunion."

"__"

"Then I shall take full accounting for thy rudeness of a few days ago—from thy flesh."

"!"

An intense mass of <<nenpa >> struck Naoe's abdomen squarely.

"Augh...!"

Naoe doubled over. The impact was like receiving a brutal right hook to the stomach. Desperately enduring his body's need to collapse, Naoe glared up at Yuzuru.

"Shingen...!"

"Your existence hath become troublesome to us. Here shall I destroy thee.

He was sent flying by a crackling flash of light.

"!"

Naoe's body hit the wall hard, and his face twisted in agony at the impact. But Yuzuru had no mercy. He pressed Naoe's body against the wall with an unseen power and walked towards him at a leisurely pace,

surrounded by an evil 'aura'.

"How now... Canst thou yet endure?"

"—"

He couldn't move. His spine crackled, and his ribs felt as if they had been crushed. He couldn't make a sound. He couldn't breathe. ...It hurt so much!

"It doth appear thou art possess'd of feeling for Narita Yuzuru. In that case let thy end be wrought by this hand!"

A small, gruesome smile rose in Yuzuru's eyes as he pressed his right hand against Naoe's throat.

(It burns!)

Yuzuru's hand scorched like red-hot steel. He could neither cry out nor faint in the burning heat. The agony overwhelmed all his senses. The burning was enough to drive him to madness.

Laughing, Yuzuru pressed harder against Naoe's throat.

(You...!)

Naoe mustered all his power. Sparks flew in all directions.

"Yeargh!"

Yuzuru's body was flung backwards. Released, Naoe collapsed to his knees.

"Ugh..."

Yuzuru's moan startled him. It seemed that Yuzuru had been hit somewhere. Oh no!

(If I'm not careful, attacking with <<nenpa >> will injure Yuzuru-san's body...!)

Yuzuru slowly raised himself. A red line of blood flowed from the corner of his lips. Shingen didn't appear to care at all about Yuzuru's body being injured.

"Well struck...Naoe," he said, the corners of his lips curving into a smile. Naoe shuddered. He had no way of fighting Shingen. He didn't have the power to perform <<choubuku >> on him directly. Neither could he just exorcise Shingen. He couldn't strike with <<nenpa >>. What should he do?

There must be a way...!

"This is the end!"

Naoe poured all his power into surrounding himself with a <<goshinha >>.

Silently, Naoe cried out in his heart a single prayer with his entire being.

Kagetora-sama...!

Oh!

Takaya suddenly turned, feeling as if someone had just called out to him.

(...Naoe...?)

They stood within the premises of [Matsumoto Castle](#) , at the place called "Black Gate" which continued from the inner moat to the castle tower. They had just driven out the warriors standing guard there and broken through—

(Was that Naoe?)

His heart clamored. Takaya trembled slightly in agitation.

(I'm sure that was...)

"Ougi-kun!"

Takaya turned at Saori's voice.

"!"

The moon appeared from behind occluding clouds.

Here, in the spacious garden right below the tower there were still traces of an inner palace. Standing beneath the soaring tower, blocking Takaya and Saori's way as if she had been expecting them, was a young woman dressed in a sailor uniform.

"Thou art late, Ougi Takaya."

"...Have I kept you waiting, Princess?" Takaya replied in a low voice, and laughed.

The wind fanned out the collar of the sailor uniform, and her long black hair danced in midair like a living creature.

Yuiko gave a small smile full of the moon's bewitching devilishness.



footnotes

[1] "tonpuku": (n) single-dose medicine



Chapter 9: Awakening

A tepid wind blew down from the castle tower and raced through the space between the two.

The cold light of the full moon threw their shadows down onto the gravel path of the inner palace.

Right hand holding the steel pipe against his shoulder and left stuck into his pocket, Takaya smiled sardonically.

"Well... I'm honored that the Princess herself came out to welcome us in person."

His tone practically oozed confidence.

"And where is your lord? I know he's here. Give Yuzuru back!"

"My Lord is not here." Yuiko replied complacently. "Not now. He hath gone forth to battle. I have awaited thee here in his stead."

"Battle? The fuck? Stop lying out of your ass!"

"And even were he here, he would not have troubled himself with such a lowly peasant as thee."

"Well, excuse me for being a peasant!"

"The lass there." Yuiko's glance moved towards Saori.

"Huh? 'Lass'...you mean m-me?"

"I thank thee. Thou hast done well. For this I shall appoint thee my handmaiden."

"Handmaiden, huh? You wanna do it?"

"Wh-wh-what are you talking about? Yuiko-chan, stop joking around—"

"Hey, I'd give it a go if the pay's good, but I don't think you're gonna need any."

"What!"

Striking the steel pipe lightly against his shoulder, Takaya said,
"Cause you won't have those bodies for much longer. I'm not in the mood to let you skeletons do whatever you like forever."

"What didst thou say?" Yuiko laughed mockingly. "And dost thou think *thou* hast the ability to drive us out?"

"Won't know 'til I try, will I?"

The skeleton warriors behind him began to move.

"There's no greater crime than breaking the school windows, y'know!"

Crack!

Takaya spun to face an attacking warrior and smashed him to pieces with an overhead strike.

The skeleton broke apart with a dry rattling sound and clattered into a heap on the ground like an unraveled science class skeletal frame.

Takaya snorted a laugh. "Or is that supposed to be live teaching material?"

Boom!

"Woah!" Suddenly the ground beneath his feet burst apart, and Takaya tumbled sideways. "Watch it! What the hell are you doing?"

"Thou darest treat one of the Takeda so?!" Yuiko's face was stiff and pale. "Thou art a monster—a demon! Show me thy true form—reveal thy true nature to me!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Thou art no human! What art thou?"

"Yeah, and I'm supposed to take that from a ghost?"

Boom boom!

The ground exploded once more, and Takaya leapt back.

"Hey! I told you to stop that!"

"Thou wilt bring disaster upon us." Yuiko stretched out her hand and pointed at Takaya. "Ougi Takaya, show me thy true form!"

"I"

In the next instant, purple fire enveloped Takaya's body with a *woosh*.

"Ougi-kun!"

Takaya had become a fireball.

"Ugh!"

"These are the flames of purification," Yuiko said loudly. "They shall remove all impurities from thee, thus returning thee to thy first form, thy true form. Reveal thy true form before me!"

"...What are you blathering on about..."

Enduring the heat of the flames, Takaya looked up and returned Yuiko's glare.

Yuiko's eyes reflected the flames.

"Show it to me now!"

The ferocity of the flames increased.

The heat brought Takaya to his knees.

"...you bitch..."

"O-Ougi-kun!" Unable to bear the sight, Saori yelled, "Stop it, Yuiko-chan! Stop!"

"__"

Yuiko returned her gaze with cold eyes. Saori clung to Yuiko desperately.

"Oh please, stop! Stop it!"

"!"

A sharp light glinted in Yuiko's eyes.

"Kyaah!"

There was a bright flash before her eyes, and Saori flew backwards.

"Morino!" Takaya yelled, and glared at Yuiko murderously. "Oh well, too bad," Yuiko's cold laugh replied.

"...bitch..."

He seethed with hatred. Trapped within the flames, Takaya's furrowed brows trembled minutely, and the blood vessels near his temples pulsed faintly.

"...that's enough!"

"Heh. Cease thy whining, thou impudent boor."

Something shimmering welled from Takaya's body.

"You are pissing me off..."

Yuiko's expression suddenly changed.

"Thou...!"

"Here's—!" Takaya snapped his arms wide—"your fire back—!"

Woosh!

"Gyaaaah!" Yuiko's awful scream echoed across the garden as crimson-hued flames engulfed her body.

Takaya stood up unsteadily, taking deep breaths, and looked at Yuiko

writhing within the flames.

"Aaah...aaaaaaaaah...aaaah——!"

"That body doesn't belong to you!" Takaya said hoarsely.

"That's Yuiko-san's body, not yours. Your own body crumbled to dust a long time ago! You're already dead!"

"How dare thee... Thou churl...!"

"And what are you? A mere **onryou** ." A roaring sound came from Takaya's body. "Leave that body——!"

"!"

Yuiko's image blurred with a whirring sound into two.

The image quivered madly, still resisting the separation from Yuiko's body.

"Leave NOW!" Takaya shouted, and with a rush of wind a black-haired woman flew out of Yuiko's body. Yuiko collapsed in place.

Far behind her, the **uchikake** -clad skeleton of a woman with long back hair cowered on the ground.

<<How dare... Thou...!>> The skeleton moaned in a dreadful grating voice. <<My...Lord... My...Lord...>>

"!"

Sanjou's spirit soared into the sky like a dragon returning to heaven.

"Wh...!"

A mass of purple light streaked a path across the sky as it flew towards the south.

"Hey! Damn you, wait...!" Takaya yelled, and then started.

(—Naoe...!)

Saori rushed over. "Ougi-kun!"

"Morino! Look after Yuiko-san!"

"Ah, wa-wait! Ougi-kun!"

In a flash Takaya was sprinting after the light. The brilliant moonlight illuminating his path glittered on the moat's water surface, where the castle tower stood reflected.

The difference in their power was painfully obvious.

Naoe, pushed back against a building's ruined wall, struggled to hold his own against Yuzuru in the one-sided battle. Shingen's spiritual power intruded into Naoe's encircling <<goshinha >> little by little as Naoe's powers weakened.

"Ugh...!"

Naoe had thrown every single bit of his power into preserving the <<goshinha >>, but it was fading all too quickly.

"Wilt thou oppose me still?"

A malevolent smile curved Yuzuru's lips as he nibbled away at the <<goshinha >> with annoyance.

"Why not resign thyself to thy fate and allow thyself to be extinguished?!"

"What...are you..."

"Is it not better to end thy pain now?"

At that moment!

A mass of light landed with a flash at their feet in a burst of wind.

"!"

Naoe looked up sharply. The light thinned radically and became the figure of a skeleton with long black hair. Yuzuru's startled eyes opened wide.

"! ...Sanjou?!"

Dragging along her crumbling uchikake , the skeleton crawled to Yuzuru as if she would cling to his feet.

<<My...my Lord...>>

Yuzuru embraced her and yelled, "What hath happened! How is it that thou art in that form!"

<<A demon... A demon comes...>>

"What, a demon?!"

Nearby, Naoe started. Yuzuru's expression darkened.

"Who? What demon?"

<<The demon comes... The demon...>>

"Sanjou!"

"!"

Flying pieces of concrete thudded down right at their heels. Sanjou gave a shuddering scream. Yuzuru turned. Naoe's eyes widened.

A voice came from the direction of the sputtering smoke.

"What the hell are you blathering on about behind people's back?" said the human figure who had appeared. A high school student with a tea-colored blazer slung over his T-shirt, panting as if he'd been running, was leaning with one hand against the collapsed wall and looking over at them.

Naoe murmured his name: "...Kagetora-sama..."

Takaya walked over, his eyes narrowed in a piercing glare.

"Who the hell are you calling a demon?"

"Thou..." Yuzuru snarled at him with hatred. Takaya's lips compressed into a thin line.

"Stop looking at me like that out of Yuzuru's eyes!"

"Was that thy power? And yet thou art not a demon?"

"—"

Takaya glanced at Naoe very slightly. Cradling his wounded arm, Naoe looked back at Takaya.

"Kagetora-sama, have your <<powers>>—"

"..."

Takaya looked daggers at Yuzuru.

"Stop talking like you're gonna toss me out with the beans!"^[1]

"What...!"

Boom!

The concrete burst open right beneath his feet. Yuzuru recoiled. Takaya glared at him stonily.

"...What art thou?"

"You saying stuff like that with Yuzuru's voice pisses me off too—" He smiled thinly. "I'm taking Yuzuru back, Shingen."

Yuzuru's expression changed as if he had sensed something.

"Thou art [kanshousha](#) , art thou not?"

Takaya's eyebrows twitched. "What was that?"

<<Demon!>> the skeleton that was Sanjou screamed.

<<He is a demon. My Lord! We must exterminate him!>>

"Bring it on!" Takaya yelled, his eyes deadly serious.



Yuzuru replied, "I know thee. I met thee in my previous life. Thou...Who art thou?"

"—!..."

"Thou art, mayhap..." Shingen's face twitched. "...Saburou Kagetora..."

"I am not!" Takaya shouted, cutting him off. "I've got nothing to do with any Kagetora! I'm Ougi Takaya! That's all, that's it!"

But Yuzuru wasn't listening. He was silent for a moment, staring at Takaya with something like astonishment.

"So I see. A demon indeed." He gave a ghastly chuckle. "Since that is so, I must destroy thee."

"Who's the demon here, you asshole!" Takaya yelled. "Give Yuzuru back, Shingen! Leave Yuzuru's body!"

"I, retreat? A proper jest!" Yuzuru responded gravely. "I shall perform **kanshou** on this body. I cannot relinquish it, for I have need of this one's <<power>> to gain supremacy over the <<Yami-Sengoku >>.

"Shingen, you bastard!"

"! Kagetora-sama!"

The concrete suddenly exploded into flame. Naoe reacted immediately, protecting Takaya and tumbling them both to safety. ...Yuzuru's eyes glinted with bloodlust. The wall next to the stairs where they had landed exploded. Separated by crumbling concrete, the two scattered in opposite directions

"Sonovabitch!"

"Don't! Kagetora-sama!" Naoe cried out urgently from the shadows behind a car. "You must not attack with <<**nenpa** >> in anger! You will injure Yuzuru-san's body!"

"Then what the hell should I do...?!"

With a loud *boom* fire erupted from the ground beneath

Takaya's feet. He tumbled aside, but his landing spot was immediately nailed by Sanjou's <<**nenpa** >>.

"Ugh!"

"Kagetora-sama!" Naoe yelled, running towards him. Yuzuru's <<nenpa >> struck continuously at his heels, not allowing him to regain his feet.

Naoe evaded the imminent danger and bounded to Takaya's side.

"Are you okay? Kagetora-sama!"

"Feels...like I got socked...in the solar plexus..."

"!"

Another explosion. The two flew to right and left, putting a large distance between them. No time to catch their breath.

Crimson flames blazing at their backs, Yuzuru and Sanjou attacked them with increasing power. Shingen yelled, "Accept thy defeat, Kagetora!"

Sanjou shrieked with a touch of madness, <<You have nowhere to run!>>

From the opposite side Naoe called out, "Kagetora-sama! We cannot attack with <<nenpa >>! We must do it! There is no other choice!"

"Do what...?!"

(Does he really expect me to perform <<choubuku >>...?!)

Takaya shouted between clenched teeth. "I-I can't do it! Damn it, I can't do something like that!"

"You can! You must!"

"I said I can't!"

Whack!

A chunk of concrete from an explosion hit him squarely on the head.

"Oooooow!"

Takaya stumbled confusedly to Naoe's side.

"Come on, you've gotta do something! Otherwise we're really gonna get killed at this rate!"

"That's why we must perform <<choubuku >>."

Naoe narrowed unsparing eyes. "From the looks of it, the female spirit is fairly weakened. She should not be difficult. The problem will be Shingen."

"Augh, fine already, just tell me what I gotta do!"

The enraged Yuzuru approached threateningly.

"You scheme like the veriest varlets! If you are true warriors, then come and face me in noble combat!"

"What the hell did you say?"

Checking Takaya, Naoe said in a lowered voice, "We will

<<exorcise>> Shingen. However, I doubt an ordinary method will work. Let us use <<kekkaichoubuku >>—'barrier exorcism.'"

"??? Kekkaichoubuku ?"

"We will paralyze Shingen, then construct the barrier—please think of it as a dome-shaped container covering us. It will block <<power>> within a thirty-meter radius."

"You really think I can do something like that?!"

"You can. We will then summon Bishamonten within the sealed container. It is the most effective way of utilizing our power of <<choubuku >>."

"You're...not joking, are you."

"However, this method of exorcism consumes an enormous amount of physical strength. If we fail, it will not be possible for us to try again. In the worst case, it may even cost us our lives. Will you attempt it even knowing that to be the case?"

Takaya's expression abruptly froze, but— "... That's the only way to save Yuzuru, isn't it?"

"Kagetora-sama..."

"If we gotta do it, then let's do it."

Boom!

The asphalt exploded violently right in front of them. They leapt backwards. Jagged pieces of debris grazed past their faces, and Takaya quickly pressed a hand against his temple.

"Au...gh..."

Naoe yelled, "Kagetora-sama!"

He touched the spot with his right hand, and his fingers came away dripping with blood. Anger boiled up as he saw the blood, and something snapped within him. He yelled towards Shingen angrily: "That's fucking enough, you assholes!"

"Silence thy profane tongue, Kagetora!" Spiritual energy flared from Shingen's entire body. "Be thou here extinguished—!"

(I'm going to <<exorcise>> him...!)

Climbing to his feet, Takaya yelled out, "Naoe! Let's do it!"

"At your command!"

The two shouted in unison, "bai"

The air around them froze with a sharp *skreen*. Sanjou's ghostly body could not move. She had been paralyzed by <<gaibaku >>.

But!

"!"

Naoe and Takaya's eyes widened simultaneously. There was one other who should have been bound by <<gaibaku >>.

Shingen returned their gaze as if he had felt nothing at all.

"...?"

Noticing the fleeting strangeness of his surroundings, Shingen muttered coolly, "What have you done?"

(The <<gaibaku >> isn't working...!)

Takaya quickly turned to Naoe. Naoe pressed his hands together once more in the symbolic gesture and focused all of his spiritual energy.

"bai!!"

"...ugh..."

For a moment, Shingen looked away as if he'd felt a shock, but—

"What is this? You would use Uesugi's witchery on me?"

Naoe blanched. Even the <<gaibaku >> had no effect against Shingen at his full power.

If they couldn't use <<gaibaku >>, then they would not be able to focus the barrier's intensity, and it would be impossible to perform the exorcism.

"You impudent wretches... If you sought to provoke my wrath, then you have achieved your aim exceedingly well!"

Yuzuru's distorted face was demon-like in its murderous rage. Naoe and Takaya stood dumbfounded.

"Vanish forever from this world—!"

"Wha!"

The ground under their feet shook with a dreadful rumbling sound, then rose up and exploded right in front of their eyes.

(!)

Without thought Naoe enveloped Takaya in his <<goshinha >>, but lost the timing for his own protection. Aiming for that opportunity, Yuzuru's <<nenpa >> attacked Naoe like a hail of pebbles. His clothes were torn to shreds. Blood splattered.

Takaya cried out, "Naoe!"

At that moment.

"Ougi-kun!"

The three turned toward the voice. A young woman in school uniform was running towards them. It was...

"Morino!"

Had she come chasing after him?

"Ougi... Yeek! Narita-kun!"

Naoe's eyes caught sight of the bracelet on Saori's wrist through a haze of pain. Ah! he thought. Of course.

(The <<talisman bracelet>>'s [Eight-Verse Dharani](#) !)

"Point that bracelet towards Yuzuru-san! Hurry!"

Saori turned to him. "Huh? What?"

(! That's it!)

Reading Naoe's intentions, Takaya shouted at Saori, "Morino! Point that bracelet at Yuzuru! Just do it! Hurry!"

"This? Point it at him?"

And Shingen realized what they were doing.

"Ah? That bracelet is...!"

"Like this?"

Saori pointed the bracelet towards Shingen.

The bracelet flared.

"Ah!" Shingen yelled, covering his face. "The [Eight-Verse Dharani](#) ?! How dare you?!"

"What is this!? Ougi-kun! What's going on?!"

"Nevermind! Just keep pointing that thing at Yuzuru!"

Rejecting the pure light released by the bracelet with all his strength, Shingen strained to reach out with his power.

"Impudent worms!"

"Kyaaaah!"

"Morino!"

Saori screamed, clutching at her wrist. Shingen had attacked her arm with his <<[nenpa](#)>>.

"Ow ow ow—! Stop it!"

"Shingen!"

The <<nenpa >> tightened around Saori's wrist as if it were going to smash the bracelet or break off Saori's arm.

"That hurts! Stop it—!"

"Dammit!"

Takaya dashed to her at once. At the same time, Naoe aimed at the ground beneath Yuzuru's feet with his will.

"Aaaah!"

Yuzuru flinched from the smashed asphalt for an instant. The power pressing against Saori's wrist slackened. Takaya rushed to her. Saori clung to him, facing crumbling as if she was going to cry.

"Ougi-kun!"

"Are you okay? Nothing's broken, right?"

"What's going on? What's wrong with Narita-kun?"

Yuzuru's eyes lighted once more. Takaya seized Saori's bracelet with both hands as Shingen attacked with his <<nenpa >>.

"Augh...!"

The terrible power attacked Takaya's hands. Takaya stubbornly resisted, concentrating his own power there.

"Kagetora-sama!"

"Naoe! Over here! Shield the bracelet!"

"—!"

Naoe's <<goshinha >>

enveloped the space around the bracelet in a sphere of light. The power tightening around the bracelet just barely weakened.

"Ougi-kun! What's going on? What's happened to Narita-kun...?!"

"Yuzuru isn't Yuzuru right now! He's been possessed by a monster!"

Rage twisted Yuzuru's face.

Wham!

"Waugh!"

"Ougi-kun!"

"Kagetora-sama!"

Takaya, flung away by Shingen's power, crashed into the hood of a car behind him. The windshield exploded. Suddenly the car jerked and then began to shake.

"!"

In the next instant the car exploded into a pillar of fire.

"No—!" Saori screamed, cowering. "Stop it—!"

Naoe had caught and shielded Takaya as he tumbled to the asphalt.

"Narita-kun! Stop it!"

"! Don't!"

Saori rushed over to Yuzuru. Yuzuru turned towards her. Naoe began to chant the [Eight-Verse Dharani](#) .

"[On anarei bishaji birabajiradari bandabandani bajirabanihan
huuntoruunhan sowaka !](#)"

The bracelet began to release an even stronger light. Yuzuru cowered where he stood.

"...! Away! Come not near me!"

"Morino!"

Saori, wearing the bracelet, embraced Yuzuru.

"Waaaaaaagh!" Shingen raised his voice in a terrible scream. Yuzuru struggled desperately in pain against Saori's clinging hold.

"Let go! Release thy hold!"

The Dharani's power was hurting Shingen more than they had guessed.

"Oooooooooough, auuuuugh!"

His spiritual aura steadily decreased and began pulsing unsteadily as his perfect power began to fail. This fact was not overlooked by Takaya and Naoe.

(Now...!)

The two raised their voices simultaneously.

bai!"

"!"

Shingen could no longer move Yuzuru's body; he had been bound by << gaibaku >>. Takaya yelled, "Good! Morino, step back!"

"Ah...okay!"

An invisible film enclosed the space around them—they had been sealed into the **choubuku** barrier. Naoe chanted, his hands pressed together in the symbolic gesture, "**Noumakusamanda bodanan baishiramandaya sowaka !**"

Takaya took over the chant. "**Ari nari tonari anaro nabi kunabi !**"

The two raised their voices together: "Let your evil grudges be shattered! All our enemies shall yield before us!"

"!"

Yuzuru's eyes widened. Sanjou gasped.

Takaya and Naoe raised clear voices in a trumpeting call to heaven: "**Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten !** Appear before us!"

A white light flashed across the night sky like lightning. A moment later, another gigantic blaze of light pierced through the heavens and fell to the earth with a terrible crash of thunder.

"!"

Engulfed within the light, all of them unthinkingly braced themselves against the shock that shook the ground.

The voice within Shingen's mind cried out in wordless terror.

A column of white light stood protectively over Takaya and Naoe. It seemed to have taken shape straight from a Buddhist drawing; it held a two-storied pagoda in its left hand, a halberd in its right, and its body was clad in armor and helm in the style of the Chinese Tang Dynasty.

A god of war stood there in all his majesty.

<<Bishamonten !>>

Shingen gazed up at the ten-meter-tall figure with wonder and terror intertwined on his face. Indeed, it was Bishamonten ,

the protector of the North, god of victory and guardian of Buddhism.

Enveloped in white light, he gazed down at Shingen with what seemed like stern command.

(No way...) Takaya thought, speechless and dumbfounded. He looked up at this impossible being for a long moment before his gaze sharpened.

"You're done for, Shingen! Give Yuzuru back!"

"Come not near me!"

Shivers rattled through his entire body. He knew that there would be no

mercy for him.

Takaya cried, "We now begin the ritual of **kouhou-choubuku** . To be exorcised are the spirits of **Takeda Shingen** and Sanjou."

"!"

Light crackled from **Bishamonten** 's body as if in reaction to his words. He concentrated his spiritual energy in the space between his eyes and chanted the mantra of **Bishamonten** :

"**Noumakusamanda bodanan baishiramandaya sowaka** ."

A red shimmering heat haze flared from Takaya's body. At the same time, a swirling wind rose from the ground beneath their feet to fan through their hair.

"We, the **Yasha** of the **Roku Dou** , pledge ourselves to the purification of a souls. Come forth!"

His eyes opened wide.

"**Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten** !"

"Away! Come not near me!"

"For this demon subjugation, lend me your power!"

<<!>>

An intense light blazed from **Bishamonten** at Takaya's words and condensed into Takaya's folded hands.

<<What...!>>

Takaya gripped a sword in both hands. Bishamonten had transformed into a luminescent sword radiating such intense energy that its light buzzed in his ears. Takaya's aura—

He was blazing with a sublime crimson aura!

"<<choubuku >>!"

!

The light exploded from Takaya's sword in an incandescent flare that seemed to rend the air apart.

<<—!>>

The power of the light distorted the very atmosphere around them. A terrible energy hurtled into the spiritual bodies of Shingen and Sanjou in the form of a storm that shred apart their bodies and ripped away the attachment of their souls. They could not think or even scream in the face of this overwhelming power. Their spiritual bodies were being crushed!

Shyroup!

Sanjou's spirit disappeared into air.

Shingen howled, "Oooooooooough—!"

Shingen resisted, defied that power pulling at him with all his

<<spiritual power>> and clung to Yuzuru's body with

terrible desperation. But the energy of the <<choubukuryoku >> released by the sword tore at him relentlessly, engulfing him in its light until he could see nothing but white.

"...!..."



The sword protected Takaya's body from its own power—such terrible power! Everything had bleached to white, and light filled their entire field of vision.

"Oooooooooough—!" cried Shingen with his last resistance.

For an instant Yuzuru's image blurred, and finally with a blast of wind Shingen was thrown out of Yuzuru's body.

"!" Takaya's eyes widened. "Shingen!"

The choubuku barrier was rent apart from the inside, and an arc of light streaked away against the night sky towards the west.

The light of <<choubuku >> overflowed to engulf the terminal building and illuminated the entire Matsumoto sky. At its peak the field of white rumbled across the heavens before

it was finally swallowed up once more by the night, and darkness gradually returned to the city.

Naoe ended the ritual with the "mantra of unsummoning":

"On basara bokisha boku ".

Takaya's eyes widened. The blade-form incarnation of Bishamonten which he had been gripping so tightly vanished with a breath of wind from his hands.

Stillness returned to Matsumoto Station . Saori, Naoe, and Takaya—and a youth lying upon the ground—remained.

—Yuzuru.

Takaya crumbled to his knees.

"Kagetora-sama!"

"..."

The power which had sustained his body had evaporated. Takaya sighed and turned to Naoe, who was supporting him at his side.

"...I'm fine. But...what about Yuzuru?"

"_"

Naoe went towards Yuzuru and picked him up in his arms. He took Yuzuru's wrist and felt his pulse. Nothing out of the ordinary. Yuzuru was fine.

Saori's legs gave away, and she sat down abruptly on the ground.

"Kagetora-sama," Naoe said.

"I'm sorry. Naoe..." The haggard Takaya murmured in a drained voice. "I couldn't complete <<choubuku >> on Shingen."

Naoe stared at him. "What did you say?"

"I was able to drive him out, but I could not perform <<choubuku >>," Takaya murmured painfully. "He broke out of the barrier. I let him get away..."

"..."

Naoe returned Takaya's gaze for a moment in silence.

(He couldn't maintain the barrier. I guess he really hasn't regained his full powers...yet?) His brows knit slightly.

But out loud Naoe said calmly, "Still, Yuzuru-san has returned to us safely, and that's more than enough for today."

Takaya turned. "Naoe—..."

Naoe patted Yuzuru's face lightly. After a moment, Yuzuru's eyelashes fluttered.

"Ugh..." he moaned, and his eyelids slid open feebly. His eyes cleared

slowly before suddenly widening.

"—Naoe...san...?"

"Are you okay, Yuzuru-san?"

"... Taka...ya..."

Takaya's usual smile finally returned as he gazed at Yuzuru.

"Finally decided to wake up...Yuzuru?"

They could hear the distant sound of sirens. But no one disturbed the four loitering awhile at the burned remains of the terminal building.

Someone gazed down at them from the rooftop of a station shopping center building—someone who had seen the entire series of events from beginning to end.

"Humph. So, Kagetora, you've finally awakened, have you?" Jet-black hair flowing in the breeze, Kousaka Danjou 's lips curved in a smile.

Of course, it was true that he had not been able to perform <<choubuku >> on Shingen, but that was no surprise given that he had just awakened.

He closed his eyes against the night wind.

They had lost Sanjou, but from all appearances Kousaka didn't precisely think it was something to grieve over.

(Call it an investment made towards Kagetora's awakening.)

Though it was true that they had lost a potential asset in a fight...well, whatever. Her powers had been limited in any case.

Still.

(Breaking out of Kageatora's [choubuku](#) barrier was no less than I expected of you, my Lord,) Kousaka smiled mirthlessly.

"—Hmm. Truly, I, Kousaka, am glad to be a vassal in your service," Kousaka said, and opened his eyes. "I'll take my thanks from your <<power>> someday. [Uesugi Kageatora](#) . [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) . And [Takeda Shingen](#) . Because all of you are...my trump cards," he murmured to himself, and looked down again upon the noisy, chaotic streets of [Matsumoto](#) .

To allow Shingen to escape, the territory barrier had also been unraveled.

A clear wind emerged.

And Kousaka quietly gazed up at the golden moon hanging in the sky.

The silent full moon.

The moon floating wordlessly in the empty sky, as if nothing of note had occurred.

footnotes

[1] tossing out the beans: at some point in Japanese antiquity beans became the symbol for evil spirits dwelling in homes and other buildings, so "tossing out the beans" is a ritual performed at the beginning of spring (a festival called Setsubun) during which beans are thrown out

of doors and windows. It symbolizes a sort of spring cleaning where evil spirits are booted out and good fortune is ushered in.

Epilogue

At dawn the scope of damage done to the city was that much more apparent. The raw traces of the [onryou](#)'s violence stunned the people of the city with its extent

Thereafter, the events of that night were covered extensively by the media and caused much hullabaloo, but since no cause or explanation was ever found, those events became hazy and before long had already faded away into nightmare and were forgotten.

Yuiko recovered very quickly and completely regained her memories. The next day her parents came to pick her up, and she returned home with them to Tokyo. (Her parents had apparently contacted the police with a missing persons report and had been desperately searching for her.) Her name was Takeda Yuiko; the blood of the Shingen family ran through her from her father.

Afterwards she and Saori kept in touch, and they became pen pals.

But all of that would come later.

Let us go back a bit in the story—

—To the dawning of the next morning, after the darkness which had passed like bad dreams in the night.

Takaya had taken Saori home, then met up with Naoe once more to chase down and perform [choubuku](#) on the remaining [onryou](#). Yuzuru had accompanied them, and by the time they were finished it was almost dawn.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble," Naoe said, standing next to the Cefiro he had parked by the school and taking out his keys. "How about I treat you to coffee?"

"I dunno about coffee, but I want breakfast. Though—" Takaya leaned back against the fence, exhaustion written all over his face—"I'd rather go home and get some sleep."

They'd ended up not returning home last night at all.

"Then let me take you home."

"Ah, thanks. Then..."

And Takaya suddenly turned to Yuzuru standing next to him, who had been looking at them with a curious expression.

"—"

After a moment, Takaya turned back to Naoe.

"Actually... Nevermind. I'll go home with Yuzuru. It's not far, so..."

"I see. That's very laudable of you."

"Naoe-san," Yuzuru said from one side.

"Thank you so much for everything. I was such a bother to you—"

"I don't think of it as bother," Naoe answered with a good-natured smile.

"This is my job. And—"

"?"

"In many ways I'm the one who should be thanking you."

Yuzuru looked at him a little blankly.

Naoe said once more, "Please stay by his side."

Finally understanding Naoe's meaning, Yuzuru smiled a sunny smile.

"...I will."

Takaya, to one side, interrupted, "Hey! Stop having a private conversation over there!"

"Hmm? Are we making you jealous?"

"Yeah, whatever!"

Climbing into the driver's seat, Naoe said, "Though you were able to use such power, it seems that you still have not regained your memories, Takaya-san."

Takaya returned Naoe's gaze.

"You may not wish to admit that you are Kagetora, but what has happened tonight is irrefutable proof. You performed the summoning ritual without any guidance from me, not to mention the exorcisms."

"—"

"Even though you may not have your memories, we need your
<<power>>. We will probably need to call on you for help

frequently from now on, so please be prepared."

"Call on me? To help you?"

"If we are to destroy the <<Yami-Sengoku >>,"

the Takeda are not the only foes we will face. There are also the

Houjou, Imagawa, Mouri, Date...and..." Naoe's eyes sharpened slightly
—"Oda Nobunaga ."

Takaya reacted with startled recognition.

For a few seconds they were silent. Then, Naoe, seeing Takaya's expression, continued, "And then there are the incorrigible troublemakers like Kousaka."



"Who's that? A buddy of yours or something?"

"...I guess I've known him for quite a while..." Naoe grumbled.

"There's a bit of history there. He's cooperated with us a few times, but he can be trouble just with his knowledge of inside information. Well, I've never really been able to figure out what he's thinking."

"What's with that? So is he dangerous or what?"

His forehead in his hand, Naoe groaned. "Well, I guess you could say that. In any case, I'll visit again soon. I didn't even get the chance to try the famous local raw horsemeat dish—"

"You didn't come here to sightsee!"

Naoe smiled faintly. "Kagetora-sama."

"?"

"Perhaps it is a good thing that your memories have not returned. Probably very much so for you...and for me."

"Naoe?"

Naoe gave him a small, silent smile. He turned the key to start the engine. "Please do some studying out of your Japanese history textbook. It will raise your grades and kill two birds with one stone."

"Feh. You've gotta be joking."

Naoe smiled. "Though I suppose in your case it should be called a review? Well then, I shall see you soon..."

Yuzuru bowed, and Naoe returned it.

Kousaka's words echoed once more in his mind: 'The existence of Narita Yuzuru is a danger to the Roku Dou Kai ."

Those words weighed on him, but in the end he hadn't been able to ask Kousaka's meaning.

Yuzuru...what in the world was—

It felt like a giant gear had been put into action. From the time he had been reunited with Kagetora.

"Well then..."

And Naoe stepped on the accelerator.

The car slowly moved down the road with a puff of exhaust smoke. Takaya and Yuzuru saw it off.

"..."

Takaya thrust a hand into his pocket as he gazed after Naoe's Cefiro, which was soon driving down the line of poplar trees.

The wind flapped in their blazers.

Takaya suddenly murmured, "Yuzuru."

"?"

Yuzuru looked at Takaya. Takaya, his eyes still chasing after the tail of the Cefiro, now turned his face away slightly.

"I...don't have any intention of changing."

"Takaya"

"—But if..."

He couldn't complete the thought out loud.

"... What's wrong, Takaya?" Yuzuru said with his usual gentle smile, "You're you. You'll be Takaya even if you change."

"Yuzuru—" Takaya turned. Yuzuru was looking at him with a limpid, forthright smile.

"..."

Takaya brushed his bangs out of his eyes and smiled slightly. "How about some soda?"

"What? Are you treating?" Yuzuru asked in a normal, cheerful tone. "Then I'll have some Aquarius."

"Aquarius? Have some PF."

"But there's no Asahi vending machine around here, is there?"

"Then let's go look for one."

The colors of sunrise spread across the eastern mountains. The two walked beneath the line of poplar trees. A pure, cool morning breeze brushed past their cheeks.

A faint premonition descended upon Takaya.

A feeling as if something was pushing against his back. Towards a road on which there would be no turning back.

Should he deny his own powers?

The sunrise dyed the [Matsumoto](#) sky purple.

The mirage-like blue-green peaks of the Northern Alps awaited the awakening of the city.

The wind blew wordlessly from the east.

END